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HOW

Dios Nos Hizo Diferentes: Children's Spiritual Activism in an EFL Classroom

Dios Nos Hizo Diferentes: Activismo Espiritual en los Niños y Niñas en un Aula de Inglés Como Lengua Extranjera

Angie Marroquin[1]
Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, Tunja, Colombia
Anna Carolina Peñaloza[2]
University of California, Davis, United States

Abstract

Though language education and research have pushed back against traditional, hegemonic ways of teaching, they continue to exclude conversations on spirituality. Moreover, a deficit lens in language education perpetuates a focus on what needs to be improved rather than on our students' assets. In this pedagogical intervention, we begin by weaving the work of feminists of color to discuss what asset-based, desired-based research and feminist pedagogy can contribute to understanding children's spiritual activism. We worked with 31 fourth graders in a private school in Duitama, Colombia. As the study took place during the pandemic and mass mobilizations, the children shared their spirituality to cope with reality. Furthermore, the children's spirituality demonstrated their belief in a higher power, positive emotions to comfort others, hope for a better future, and an understanding of equity based on race and gender. We invite language educators and researchers to create spaces for children to share

[1] She is a passionate teacher and communicator. She studied a B.Ed. in Modern Languages and an M.A. in Language Teaching at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC). She has experience teaching all levels of education from elementary to undergraduate. Currently, she is the HR leader of an international company called Logical Media Group.
angie.marroquin@uptc.edu.co
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6637-1705

[2] She holds a B.A. in Environmental Science from the University of Arizona and an M.A. in Language Teaching from the UPTC. She is a doctoral student at the University of California, Davis. Her research interests include feminist pedagogy, feminist writing, social equity, STEM, and art literacy.
acpenaloza@ucdavis.edu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6394-4346

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their spiritual activism through the integration of feminist pedagogy focused on asset and desire-based approaches.

Keywords: asset-based, children, desire-based, EFL, equity, feminist pedagogy, spiritual activism

Resumen

Aunque la educación y la investigación en idiomas han rechazado las formas tradicionales y hegemónicas de enseñanza, continúan excluyendo las conversaciones sobre espiritualidad. Además, existe una perspectiva de déficit en la educación de idiomas que perpetúa el enfoque en lo que es necesario mejorar en lugar de los talentos existentes en nuestros estudiantes. En esta intervención pedagógica, comenzamos tejiendo el trabajo desde las feministas de color para discutir qué investigación y qué pedagogía feminista basada en los talentos y los deseos pueden contribuir a la comprensión del activismo espiritual de los niños. Trabajamos con 31 estudiantes de cuarto grado en una escuela privada en Duitama, Colombia. Ya que el estudio se desarrolló durante la pandemia y las movilizaciones masivas, los niños compartieron su espiritualidad como una forma de afrontar la realidad. En consecuencia, su espiritualidad demostró su creencia en un poder superior, emociones positivas para consolar a los demás, esperanza de un futuro mejor y una comprensión de la equidad basada en la raza y el género. Invitamos a educadores e investigadores de idiomas a crear espacios para que los niños compartan su activismo espiritual por medio de la integración de una pedagogía feminista centrada en enfoques basados en talentos y deseos.

Palabras Clave: metodología basada en fortalezas, niños, metodología basada en deseos, activísimo espiritual, equidad, ILE, niños, pedagogía feminista

A Dream Called Pedagogy

Not only Martin Luther King
but also me, I do have a dream.
As Lennon sang extraordinary verses,
I am a dreamer in all the senses.
When I think of pedagogy,
sharing is all that I see.
Just comprehension for you and me,
the warm place to be unique,
the land to grow my roots and beliefs.
The future is bright
if we search for a light
that lights us inside
and impulses an action that changes
someone's life. (Angie)

In the traditional banking system of education, Paulo Freire talked about how the teacher is the sole knowledge provider. The teacher, a *passive technician*, deposits information into their students' minds to be retrieved later. Though the traditional banking system has been critiqued for years, it lives in all language education and research facets. Terry Osborn[3] (2007) stated, "positivistic limitations within the field (of language teaching) have stifled or even excluded inquiry into the relationship between language learning, teaching, and spirit, based on the false neutrality of so-called 'scientific evidence'" (p. 5). Though research may be conducted under a qualitative paradigm, a deficit view of language learners focuses on what they *lack* and not what they *have*. Other paradigms that push back on traditional banking education have also limited spiritual voices from being heard in the language classroom.

Our work in Colombia has shown that being *transformative intellectuals* is impossible while perpetuating traditional teaching and research practices. First, teaching requires direct involvement with other human beings while understanding their worldviews and self-perceptions. Second, we must humanize who we are as teachers and researchers. Lastly, we need to push for room to dream and re-imagine education together.

The following article is our re-imagining of education with a group of fourth-grade students in an English language classroom in a private school in Duitama, Colombia. We integrated feminist pedagogy to invite students to multiple ways of seeing the world while challenging traditional language learning and research approaches. We integrate the work of women of color in education that connects asset-based learning, desired-based research, feminist pedagogy, and spiritual activism. By weaving the contributions of Black, Chicana/Latina, and Native scholars, we address social issues in the classroom that center children's dreams and hopes for the future. For the current study, we sought to answer the question '*What do children reveal about their spiritual activism regarding social justice issues?'* We, the educators and children, discussed issues related to racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism. Data like children's drawings, poems, and messages helped us better understand how they used spirituality to re-imagine a better world and cope with social injustices.

Our Positionality

Angie

My family consists of my mom, sister, and me. We have lived in Boyacá since we were children. In this region of the country, the traditional Catholic culture is rooted in daily practices. When I was at school, the curriculum was based on Catholicism and social politics;

[3] We use the first and last name for in-text citations as a form of citational justice and a feminist stance to highlight women's scholarship.

however, I started digging into how spirituality may look to me and how I could see the world from there. When I became a teacher, I returned to teach at Catholic schools and realized that everything was the same as when I was a child. I knew I wanted richer experiences for my students, from how we related to each other to how we felt in class and the accountability we experienced there.

Anna

I grew up in the United States as a first-generation Latina proud of my Colombian roots. As a child, I went to a predominantly Black Catholic school. When I turned eight, my family moved, and I began my journey through predominantly White public educational spaces where I was constantly racialized by my peers and teachers. When I became a teacher in higher education, it became clear that I needed to stop the perpetuation of racialization and gender aggression in the classroom.

Together, we present this work that stems from Angie's master's dissertation and many conversations on feminism, faith, and spirituality. Before beginning the study, we nourished critical dialogue on our intersectional identities (race, gender, age, ethnicity, spirituality, etc.) to understand the multiple points of privilege and oppression we faced. We are cognizant that we and the children we worked with are part of the dominant "mestizo" culture in Colombia that is socially privileged by the State. At the same time, Anna's racialization as a woman of color in the U.S. and her current work with marginalized communities, as well as our experiences as women in a *machista* [male-dominated] culture, provided lenses to understand asset and desire-based frameworks. From our conversations, the study emerged; it is founded on feminist pedagogy and asset-based frameworks aligned with a critical perspective in which every child was welcome to contribute from their ways of being, knowing, and power. This study represents our friendship and unity in academia; it is also a call to action to re-think language education.

Conceptual Framework

Asset and Desire-Based Research

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research can often depict students from a deficit lens. Phrases like '*How we can improve x with y'* still dominate academic discourses. Wang et al. (2021) stated, "Deficit views involve a narrow focus on what students do not have or cannot do" (p. 1). In Colombia, the EFL deficit lens comes from a history of national bilingual policies and external entities that have displaced local stakeholders as knowledge providers and creators. For example, the British Council administered three English language diagnostic exams in Colombia in 2005. This entity claimed that 98.2% of Colombian teachers and 93.6% of students were below an advanced English language proficiency level (Usma, 2009).

The exams were then used to "designate the British Council in Colombia as the leading implementation agency around the country" (p. 129). Almost 20 years later, we still see news headlines such as '*Colombia, con uno de los niveles de inglés más bajos del mundo'* [Colombia, one of the worst English levels in the world] (Chacón, 2021). Reports like these fail to capture the multiplicity of cultures, languages, and assets among Colombian educators and students.

Unfortunately, a deficit-based approach in language research focuses on children's foreign language deficiencies and how they can be solved with external approaches. Deficit thinking can lead teacher-researchers to see children's academic performance as the sole indicator of success with low performance falsely attributed to a lack of cultural knowledge or parental involvement in their education (Yosso, 2005). Often, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and other minoritized communities are represented as static, singular identities in need of help from institutional experts. Hence, an asset-based approach to research and learning recognizes that students bring much more to the table, whether it be through familial, linguistic, social, navigational, aspirational, or resistance capital (Yosso, 2005). Even when materials include BIPOC communities, minoritized people are often presented as 'damaged' without taking the time to explore their assets, wishes, hopes, and dreams (Tuck, 2009). For instance, Bonilla (2008) found that EFL textbooks perpetuated the dominant White American and British culture, presented a superficial view of multiculturalism, and were filled with gender and race stereotypes. In a more recent study, Nuñez Pardo (2022) found the perpetuation of Anglo-Saxon ideologies that diminished gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in Colombian English Textbooks, as well as placing the reader "as an object focused on bare decoding and literal reading of predetermined knowledge" (p. 709). Colombian scholars like Ramos-Holguín (2021) and Granados-Beltrán (2022) have pushed for the creation of culturally relevant material that invites critical interculturality, or the recognition of multiple ways of knowing, being, and power through dialogues of care and action.

For the following study, we implemented an asset and desire-based lens. A desire-based approach to research emphasizes "understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). A desire-based approach provides space to introduce social justice issues and BIPOC communities from their imaging and hopes without focusing only on the 'damage' done. Furthermore, a desire-based framework invites children to reflect on their longing, creativity, imagination, and hope for a more equitable future. In addition, we chose to use feminist pedagogy to expand further the potential of asset and desire-based frameworks on spiritual activism research.

Feminist Pedagogy

Carolyn Shrewsbury (1987) defined feminist pedagogy as "a vision of the classroom as a liberatory environment in which we, teacher-student and student-teacher, act as subjects,

not objects" (p. 6). Influenced by critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy has an education for liberation agenda. However, we note that not all feminism is practiced the same way. Indigenous scholar Sandy Grande (2003) pointed out that "'mainstream' feminism uses colonial discourses that consequently essentialized feminist pedagogy. In this light, feminist pedagogy becomes a simplistic project concerned with 'giving voice' to the 'silenced desires' of (white) women" (pp. 331-332). Pushing back on "damaged-centered" research, we intentionally implemented bell hooks' feminist pedagogy focused on the intersection of race and gender, the lived experience as a place of theory, education as liberatory practice, and a holistic recognition of the human being.

We want to highlight hooks' attention to community, radical love, and spirituality. hooks (2001) stated,

> All the great social movements for freedom and justice in our society have promoted a love ethic. Concern for the collective good of our nation, city, or neighbor rooted in the values of love makes us all seek to nurture and protect that good. (p. 98)

When we speak about using a feminist pedagogy that advances the efforts of BIPOC communities and focuses on children's desires, it is quintessential to include a love ethic. Without love, we fall into a deficit, damage-centered lens. To include love is also to talk about collective future dreaming. Darnell L. Moore (2018) stated, "The way we treat people; our willingness or unwillingness to engage others; our care; our love is as crucial and political as anything else, because Black radical love not only anticipates liberatory Black futures, but also leans into such futures" (p. 328). Love, then, becomes a collective way to care for others and the self, and it is both longed for and desired as it becomes part of a re-imagined future for/with BIPOC communities and children.

Spiritual Activism

bell hooks often wrote about spirituality stating that "Living life in touch with the divine spirit lets us see the light of love in all living beings" (2011, p. 71). For hooks, spirituality was "about commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness" (p. 77). A spiritual connection has empowered humanity to overcome wars, pandemics, and various systems of oppression. One example is the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who used peaceful protest and direct action to fight segregation. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a spiritual identity evident in his sermons, in which people saw the "chant as a form of prayer…chants were a way of understanding and preserving spirituality" (Uribe, 2016, p. 34). Together, they transformed adversity into action through the hope of change. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, "With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together,

knowing that we will be free one day" (1963). Without a doubt, spirituality has carried BIPOC communities in the struggle for freedom and justice; it continues to be a staple in community care and wellness (López Salas, 2023).

We recognize spirituality as a way of knowing and understanding the world and a way for children to cope with social injustice. Gloria Anzaldúa contributed profoundly to Chicana/Latina feminist, queer, and cultural theories in addition to our construction of spiritual activism. Anzaldúa's concept of spiritual activism connects to *conocimiento* - her theory on consciousness and knowledge about one's inner (mental, emotional, spiritual) and outer (social, political, cultural) experiences. Anzaldúa (2002, as cited in Keating, 2022, p. 203) stated,

> The inner/outer work makes bridges between the life of the mind, the life of the body, and the life of the spirit, the life of the collective. In the moments of connection between the inner and outer worlds the soul and physical world come together, intersect. Spiritual activism stitches the two fabrics together.

Spiritual activism joins the physical and spiritual worlds connecting body, mind, spirit, and collective. For Anzaldúa, spiritual activism was "spirituality for social change, spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses this holistic worldview" (Keating, 2008, p. 54). Acknowledging spiritual activism as a way children cope with social injustice is a means of inviting broader world views that decolonize pedagogy and research. Therefore, children use spiritual activism to see their inner world and transform their outer world.

In the figure below, we summarize our conceptual framework. Asset-based research is a lens that sees the children and each other as knowledge creators. Desire-based research allows us to focus on the children's hopes, longing, and future dreaming as knowledge. Feminist pedagogy is the bridge that motivates a complete transformation of the environment and power structures in the classroom to get to spiritual activism, a decolonial understanding of how children cope with and act upon social injustices.

Pedagogical Intervention

The following study is situated under a qualitative paradigm due to our interest in "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). We utilized a critical epistemological lens to plan the study and analyze the data. A critical epistemology sees reality as multiple and shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political contexts (Luttrell, 2010). The critical research objective is to work for and with participants to uncover the structures of oppression that can lead to emancipation and empowerment.

Figure 1. *Our Lenses*

For us, feminist pedagogy was the bridge to unveil children's spiritual activism. Feminist pedagogy is a conscious and intentional view of education that recognizes systemic oppression and privilege while striving toward emancipation and empowerment. hooks (1994) stated that "making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy" (p. 39). Below, we introduce the six pillars of feminist pedagogy (Webb et al., 2002), which we integrated during the study.

Table 1. *The Six Pillars of Feminist Pedagogy*

Pillar	Focus	Implementation
Reformation of the relationship between professor and student	Teachers and students share power in the classroom.	• Plan lessons that create spaces for children to dialogue. • Invite community members (teachers, parents, grandparents) to the class. • Organize desks in a circle or have class outside.
Empowerment of teachers and students	Involves principles of democracy and shared power.	• Create a book of messages for undergraduate students and read responses as a group. • Read '*I'm Glad to Be Me*' and listen to "*Hey Black Child*" by Maya Angelou and interpreted by Pe'Tehn Raighn Kem. • Discuss positions of power and participation with the children.

Pillar	Focus	Implementation
Building community	Builds community within and outside the classroom.	• Read *'The Things That Really Matter'* by Rafiloe Moahloli, Natalie Pierre, and Eugene Subi Bosa. • Write a book of messages to undergraduate students. • Listen to "*Imagine*" by John Lennon; understand that we are not alone, there is room for everyone.
Privileging the individual voice as a way of knowing	Sees knowledge as co-constructed and connected to context and culture.	• Listen to grandparents share stories in the classroom. • Create posters describing their grandparents' strengths.
Respect for diversity of personal experience	Generates theory from personal experience.	• Read *'Hear My Voice'* by Warren Binford • Draw a dream world.
Challenging traditional views	Challenges universal knowledge and objective.	• Read *'The Girl with the Rough Face'* by Rafe Martin and David Shannon to challenge traditional beauty standards.

Setting and Participants

We integrated local social issues happening within our context and provided spaces for our students to discuss these events critically. The first reason was because we carried out this study during the pandemic. The second was the mass Colombian mobilizations that escalated on April 28, 2021, due to tax reforms, health and economic inequities, and police brutality. Angie taught at a private Catholic school in Duitama, Boyacá, and Anna was a public university professor in a language education department. Both the pandemic and mobilizations shook our community, especially knowing that among the murdered in the mobilizations were a 17-year-old boy and several university students. Moreover, images of gender-based violence during the protests circulated in mass media.

We worked with 31 students (20 girls, 11 boys) in fourth grade. The children came from different socio-economic backgrounds with some students' families able to afford tuition while others relied on scholarships. We discussed privilege in the classroom since most students came from middle-class families. Other community members were part of the process, such as Anna's university students and the children's grandparents. We acknowledge their contributions as part of the study. We informed all the parents about the study and obtained their consent. Additionally, the children's assent was asked for, and we informed

them when we collected data and recorded the workshop sessions. The names that appear in this study are all pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

We designed five workshops centered on local issues (see Table 3). Each workshop lasted two weeks. Additionally, we integrated materials like children's books, videos, and poems to facilitate the discussion. The materials were often created by BIPOC communities and exemplified an asset and desired-based lens (see Table 2). Based on the workshops, the data we collected came primarily from the children's artifacts, such as their drawings, messages, and poems.

Table 2. *Workshops and Data Collection Process*

Week	Topic	Data Collection Instruments
1-2	Mental Health	Messages of comfort related to COVID-19 and the mobilizations exchanged between college students and children
3-4	Beauty Standards	Artifacts (drawings) and focus group discussion based on the characters in *The Girl with the Rough Face.*
5-6	Immigration	Artifacts (drawings) based on children's imagined worlds.
7-9	Racism	Documents (poems) after watching and discussing "*I'm Glad to Be Me*".
10-12	Ageism	Artifacts, observations, and interview transcriptions based on personal stories and grandparents' contributions to the class.

For this paper's purposes, we focused on the weeks we discussed mental health, immigration, and racism as they yielded the most data on children's social justice perspectives. In the following section, we describe the type of data analysis we used and the results from our study.

Findings

We worked together to code and discuss the main themes by collaborative data analysis (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Our analysis was a conversation that brought many insights and admiration concerning the children's spiritual activism. The data presented below came primarily from the female participants, as they mostly expressed their spiritual activism to discuss social justice issues. We found four main themes: *Spirituality and a Higher Power*; *Emotions as Part of Spirituality; Hope*; and *Spirituality and Gender.*

Spirituality and a Higher Power

This first theme emerged from the students' messages of hope and other representations of spirituality during the study. Spirituality is a personal journey of how one's spirit is

connected to a higher power. Koenig (2009) stated that patients with medical and psychiatric illnesses use religion and spirituality as a coping mechanism. In this case, we focused on the children's spiritual beliefs in connection to empathy and support of others during the pandemic and mobilizations.

One of the first activities we collaborated on was writing messages between the children and university students. The first excerpt[4] is a message written by Danna, a fourth grader, to Anna's class, "because only God knows why you put them, He makes you stronger every day" (Danna).

In the excerpt, Danna mentioned God as a higher power that controls our lives. Beyond that, she showed her vision of hope and strength founded in her spirituality. Her individual spiritual beliefs were a way for her to overcome tough situations in life. Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg (1993) critiqued children's cognitive development theories in what they termed "post-formal thinking". Kincheloe and Steinberg stated, "Moving to post-formality, critical educators politicize cognition; they attempt to disengage themselves from socio-interpersonal norms and ideological expectations" (p. 297). In other words, young children can critically construct knowledge based on personal experiences and daily life situations that challenge "norms".

According to Susannah Cole (2011), post-formalism can help us understand children's spirituality as a means of expression, thereby, bringing up "questions of purpose, meaning, human dignity, freedom, and social responsibility" (p. 8). Moreover, Cole stated that creativity supports children's spiritual knowledge creation. Acknowledging and respecting children's spirituality is connected to how feminist pedagogy privileges the individual voice as a way of knowing and respects the diversity of personal experience. When children's knowledges are brought into the classroom, as an act of challenging traditional education, they are validated and appreciated. However, we note that spirituality in the classroom is not meant to be evaluated but comprehended and honored.

In the following message, The Star placed herself in her reader's shoes and envisioned their situation. The Star spoke of strength and courage through her spirituality: "Hello, I just wanted to tell you that I am sorry for your loss. I hope you recover soon. God gives you a lot of strength because heaven takes care of you" (The Star).

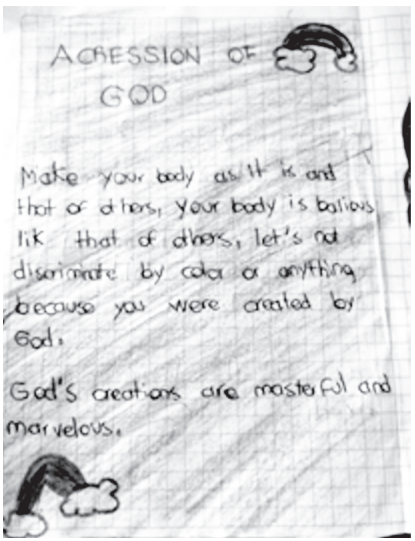
In The Star's message, she imagined that her reader had lost someone due to the pandemic or mobilizations. Like Ranico 21, she mentioned God as a higher power and source of strength. Her message contained a spiritual vision of the world, as she attributed

[4] The excerpts in this paper are verbatim. We take a stance to not use [sic] to highlight language errors, as part of an asset-based approach to honor children's language choices.

qualities and actions to 'heaven' and a higher power that would take care of the person reading this message.

The Star showed aspects of hope and future dreaming. Gutiérrez (2022) mentioned that a desire-based approach to spiritual activism understands hope as the future of a community. The Star expressed her empathy, which comes from her inner understanding of the world. Children can contribute to the future of their community by first validating that there is actual pain being felt and that unjust situations are happening. Second, they see hope in their future without ignoring the pain. As Gutiérrez stated, "We cannot heal without tending to wounds" (p. 318). Hence, The Star acknowledged the pain from her spiritual understanding to help the other heal.

During the workshops, we discussed segregation, discrimination, and racism with the children. Understanding their ideas and beliefs about the topic was essential for us, including any personal experiences they may have had. The children spoke about feeling left out when they played games at school or when others unfairly treated them because of their appearance or outfit. In the children's artwork and messages, they shared their beliefs about equity, physical appearance, and spirituality. Bat Bunny, a participating student, created the following excerpt and image; she showed that she believed that we are all God's creation.



Make your body as it is and that of hers, your body is balious lik (sic) that of others, let's not discriminate by color or anything because you were created by God. God's creations are masterful and marvelous. (Bat Bunny)

Figure 2. *Bat Bunny's Dream World*

Bat Bunny shared her understanding of equity through the lens that we are all creations of a superior being who made us with unique characteristics. We noted Bat Bunny's language choices, as she described the assets of others as valuable, masterful, and marvelous. Gutiérrez (2022) stated that spirituality is "the various ways people see unity in all things and draw on tradition to heal and remake ourselves" (p. 381). Bat Bunny saw unity and value in all bodies. For her, we are all created by a higher power, and therefore, we must not discriminate against others based on 'color' or race. Bat Bunny's spiritual activism invited her readers to treat others fairly.

The excerpts and images we included in this category are full of power and strength. The children made complex language choices to offer positive messages and provide comfort from their spirituality. The children encouraged others to overcome difficult situations while also acknowledging their tribulations.

Emotions as Part of Spirituality

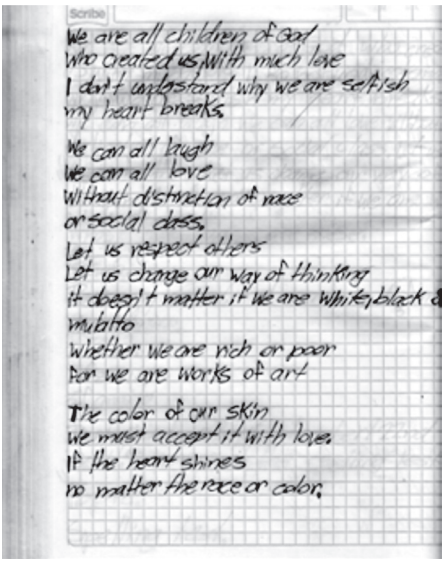
One of the main takeaways from this study was how children expressed spirituality as separate from religious rituals or traditions. Spirituality is attached to the children's emotions, sources of strength, and hope. This second main theme comes from the children's positive and hopeful emotions connected to their spirituality. In the activity where the children wrote messages to the university students, they encouraged others to stay positive despite the difficult situation. Even though they were aware of the threats from the pandemic and mobilizations, the children made communication choices to write uplifting messages, such as Happy Face's excerpt: "Hello! I come to say some beautiful words that can make you smile, smile every day and God **will** make you laugh" (Happy face).

Happy Face used positive words like "beautiful", "smile", and "laugh". From a communicative perspective, he was able to convey happiness and joy. He saw the possibility of feeling joy through God; that is the way he thought people could experience relief. His message also stated that if his readers can keep positive, God will bring joy to their lives.

Empathy was another emotion that dominated the children's messages and artwork. In the next excerpt, Ana Morales' message showed how she understood other's suffering: "Although my arms can't hug you to protect you, I hug you in my pray (sic)" (Ana Morales).

In Ana Morales' excerpt, her spiritual activism was the connection between the inner world and the material reality. There, Ana Morales understood that she could not engage in physical affection because of the pandemic. Nevertheless, she imagined a spiritual hug where the embrace was carried out not by her arms but by her prayers. She could empathize with the other, imagining their situation and offering her support through spiritual affection.

The following poem came from a workshop where we discussed racism and anti-Blackness. We saw a video where Pe'Tehn Raighn Kem, a three-year-old girl, interpreted "Hey Black Child" by Maya Angelou. We chose this video as an example of how children's voices can be heard in different spaces and empower their communities. The children were then invited to write poems about any social justice topic discussed in class. They started the creation at home with the help of their community. The results were full of emotional and spiritual content, as seen in Migue's poem below.



We are all children of God
who created us, with much love
I don't understand why we are selfish
my heart breaks

We can all laugh
we can all love
without discrimination of race
and social class
Let us respect others
Let us change our way of thinking
it doesn't matter if we are white, or black
or mulatto
whether we are rich or poor
for we are works of art

The color of their skin
we must accept it with love
if the heart shines
No matter the race or color.

Figure 3. *Migue's Poem*

The children were free to choose any topic they wanted, so the fact that Migue chose racism as the main topic of his poem is an interest he showed. In the first stanza, he took a critical position where discrimination made no sense since there is equality in God's creation. For Migue, God created everyone with physical differences but with the commonality that they are all "children of God". The way to see unity in these poems and the different artifacts is through one creation that has the characteristic of being diverse. The concept of diversity is expressed as something made on purpose, not to be fixed to make everyone look the same. Finishing the first stanza, Migue brought up how his heart broke because of social injustices. In the second stanza, Migue started with positive language and a call to action. Here, we saw

how social justice started from a critical consciousness of treating others better regardless of the color of their skin. This critical consciousness is connected to Migue's heart, the place where spirituality emerges.

Hope

Another main theme was hope. Hope, or the belief that better days will come, is part of future dreaming Bettina Love (2019) wrote about hope among BIPOC communities and education. She stated, "They hope that life can and will be better for the next generation. That is the grit of dark people. They work endlessly for the next generation and the next day with resolve, purpose, hope, faith, and a desire for their children to thrive one day off the labor of their grit" (p. 78). Hence, hope for a better future for BIPOC communities must go hand in hand with actions and solutions to make it happen. In this section, we share how children display their hopes for a more equitable future connected to their spiritual activism.

As mentioned before, part of the data collection took place during the national mobilizations. In the following excerpt, Happy Face wrote a message to the university students, which we previously analyzed because of its positive messages. We returned to understand how hope was being discussed: "Hello! I come to say some beautiful words that can make you smile, smile every day and God will make you laugh" (Happy Face).

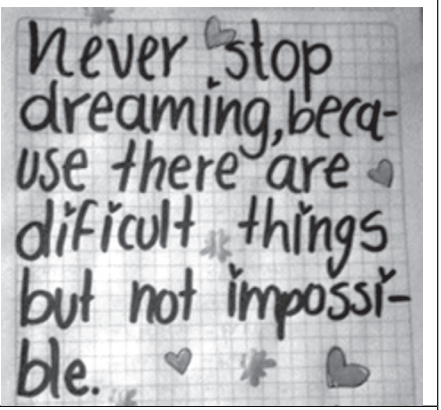
Happy Face's message was written with present and future tenses. Though Angie was not explicitly teaching verb tenses nor asking the children to use the future conjugation, Happy Face made linguistic choices to convey his message. Happy Face first stated an action. He was sharing these "beautiful words" that would hopefully cause the reader to smile. Happy Face recognized that the words he was sharing were valuable and could affect whoever read them. To close his statement, he declared his spirituality by mentioning that God would make that person laugh. He used the future tense 'will' to show how God's actions would have positive effects on the reader. Happy Face's message was filled with hope rooted in the action he took through his words and the hope that a higher power would bring joy to another's life.

Hope and its connection to future dreaming were also visible in the responses the children received from the undergraduate language majors.

In the response messages, the university students referenced finding comfort in the children's messages. They saw them as a light, "super-champions", and the future. One aspect of feminist pedagogy that promotes an asset and desired-based lens is building a community where everyone, regardless of age or status, is valued and appreciated.

Hi Super Champions!
I hope you be (sic) well. Your messages were very touching. You are great people and remember 'no matter how big the waves of the sea are, the important thing, is to accept the risk and be willing to go through them'
See you later guys…

Figure 4. *Undergraduates' Responses to Children*



Never stop dreaming, because there are dificult (sic) things but not impossible.

Figure 5. *Undergraduates' Responses to Children*

In the next excerpts, Ranico 21 and Oriana wrote messages that wove spiritual activism and hope with a consciousness of the material world: "It takes bad days to realize how beautiful others are" (Ranico 21 Artifact 1); "Don't give up and move on, God is with you" (Oriana, Student Artifact 1).

Ranico 21 showed us how she understood that bad days were happening right then. However, she had hope that beautiful days would come. Living the experience of a bad day allows us to recognize that other days can be beautiful. For Oriana, her way of comforting others during these difficult times was by telling her reader not to give up. At the same time, she mentioned that God was with the person who would read her message. Here, she connected what was happening at present with messages of comfort and a connection to a higher power as a protector and guide.

Spirituality and Gender

In this section, we discuss the representation of gender and spirituality through the children's drawings. Spiritual activism connects to how we see ourselves, our faith, and the

material world. In that sense, spiritual activism like gender is a social construct shaped by cultural, political, and historical contexts. In this study, the children attended a Catholic private school with teachings that most likely aligned with what they learned at home from their parents. Though Angie did not teach religion nor require the children to talk about their vision of spirituality, the children chose to represent their faith and beliefs in a higher power together with their visions of equity and justice.

The first image comes from Estrella's dream world. The image below also has a quote that said, "*Dios nos hizo diferentes"* [God made us different].

Dios nos hizo diferentes.
[God made us all different]

Figure 6. *Estrella's Dream World*

In Estrella's drawing, a Black and White girl are playing together underneath a smiling angel. The girls were wearing dresses and were of equal height. One aspect to note is that Angie's classroom had no Black children. So, for Estrella to draw a Black child was significant because her dream world included People of Color. Moreover, Estrella believed that God created all of us differently.

At the same time, Estrella's vision of a spiritual being, the angel, is White and male. According to Stuart Hall (2020), "Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things" (p. 74). In this case, the children are still developing their understanding of spirituality and religion based on the signs and symbols they see and receive from their school, community, and home. How children envision spiritual beings could replicate how they see their spiritual activism.

Steven Roberts, a Stanford University psychologist, worked with 1,000 Christians and asked them to identify the picture of a person that represented their image of God. Then, they were asked to choose the image of a person that looked like a leader. The results revealed that the participants who chose White male images for God were also more likely to choose White male leaders over Black and/or female candidates (Grewal, 2020). In Tomás' dream world below, the future is White and male. Tomás drew the peace dove presiding over three light-skinned male children. We highlight that even though none of the children present in Angie's classroom identified as Afro-descendant, many of the children were darker-skinned. Nevertheless, the children often drew themselves as having light skin. When Angie asked the children to pick the color that best represented their own, all the children selected the light-skin crayon.

In Figure 8 Ranico 21 drew her dream world, one where the rich give to the poor. She also added her reflection to the side.

Like Estrella, Ranico 21 stated her spiritual activism that everyone, regardless of their identity, was God's creation and, consequently, should help each other. In Ranico 21's dream world, the rich help the poor. Interestingly, the rich also continue helping the poor over time, as expressed by the speech bubble "I will keep helping you". For Ranico 21, a future for humanity is only possible through a long-term relationship with the more economically privileged helping those in need.

One aspect to highlight is that Ranico 21 drew two White men carrying out the conversation on social justice. We know that Ranico 21 is not a White male; however, the poor, old man and the rich man were drawn as such. Though all the colors were available for Ranico 21 to use, her image of wealth is a White male with light red hair, a characteristic that none of the children have nor do their communities typically share. At the same time, the

Figure 7. *Tomás' Dream World*

Mira te doy este dinero para tus hijos para que les compres comida. Te voy a seguir ayudando
[Look, let me give you this money for your children so you can buy them food. I will keep helping you.]

Gracias, señor. Ojalá todos los ricos fueran así.
[Thank you, sir. I wish all rich people were like this.]

"All human beings should help each other regardless of color or social status. We are all children of *Dios*."

Figure 8. *Ranico 21's Dream World*

poor man was older than the rich man, and he also carried out a heterosexual male identity as a father who had children to feed. We noted the importance of representation through visuals or written words on what the poor and rich look like, as well as the causes of poverty in a country like Colombia. As Ranico 21 and all the children in this study grow older, social representations will continue to shape how they perceive race, gender, ability, age, and other social constructs and whether they will see the connection between discrimination and systemic oppression.

Just as certain gender and race stereotypes were perpetuated in the children's drawings, they were also challenged and negotiated. For example, Sara's dream world (Figure 9) showed girls and boys engaging in different activities together.

In the first panel of the drawing, a White boy and a Black boy are going to the clothing store, an activity often associated with femininity. In the second panel, two White girls and one Black girl are smiling together, all of which are the same height. In the third panel, one Black and one White person are playing soccer, but the gender was not made explicit. The fourth panel has integrated White and Black men and women waiting at the bank. In the fifth and sixth panels, Sara chose not to show any faces, but their hands were playing with a hair comb, hair tie, and dolls. As with the other participants, equity was represented by the integration of Black and White people. In the panels where Sara attempted to represent gender, the girls and boys were separated. Nevertheless, boys and girls were carrying out activities that challenged gender stereotypes.

Spirituality is a strength that both male and female children employ in times of hardship and comforting others. Stereotypes that label women as weak, fragile, and soft, and men as strong, brave, and athletic are common in Colombia. However, spirituality

Figure 9. *Sara's Dream World*

is a source of strength, especially for women during difficult times. Angela Lederach (2018) conducted an ethnography in Colombia with the Youth Peace Provokers of the Alta Montaña. She found that their experiences in the aftermath of decades of war were gendered. She wrote, "How young people navigate, resist and mobilize within the complex landscape of armed conflict shapes their identities, roles and approaches to peace in the aftermath" (pp. 200-201). What this means for our context and the study results is that how children perceive spirituality and gender will also shape their identities as peacemakers and spiritual activists. Hence, a connection to one's spirituality fosters a sense of activism and leadership when partaking in social justice; thereby, encouraging young girls and boys to become peacemakers.

Conclusion

Children bring their spirituality as making sense of the world and coping through difficult times. Their spirituality was connected to their emotions, hope for the future, empathy, and even peacebuilding. Though the children attended a religious institution, they did not discuss religious beliefs or traditions. Rather, they tapped into their spirituality by mentioning God as a higher power in times of need. Furthermore, they saw God as the creator of all beings, which justified their belief that we were made differently but equal in God's love. Hence, the children's notions of equity were connected to their belief that God created us.

During difficult situations, the children used positive language to uplift their readers. They imagine three dimensions: their reality, the imagined reality of the other, and a spiritual plane that protected and guided them both. The children understood that their

readers were in pain. Without diminishing their tribulations, they used positive language to aid in the healing process. Hope was another aspect that emerged from the children's artwork, messages, and poems. Hope was visible in their belief that better days would come. Children made language choices to use future tenses to show a certainty that God would protect and heal the other. Finally, the children's representations of race and gender demonstrated their understanding of spirituality and social justice as a gendered experience. For the children, equity was shown through drawings of White and Black children of equal height sharing space. In another drawing, the child's future world was White and male. In another, gender roles were negotiated. When we think of spirituality as a source of power, children can re-imagine a world where strength is no longer a masculine characteristic. For BIPOC children, especially young girls defining their role as peacemakers in the Colombian context, how children see themselves in terms of spirituality will affect how they perform their activism.

We invite language educators interested in creating spaces to listen to students' spiritual voices to remember that there is no singular way to practice feminist pedagogy. Students' languages, needs, interests, and local contexts should always come first. Additionally, teachers should get comfortable with self-reflection. They can keep a journal to explore their positionalities and reflect on their positions of power in the classroom. Applying the six pillars of feminist pedagogy, or some variation of the pillars, to make a complete classroom reformation becomes necessary. We believe that changing one aspect without considering the classroom layout, who gets to participate, what is being challenged in the curriculum, or even who is invited to speak will not create a place for children to share their true selves. Lastly, we request that language educators and researchers bring spirituality to humanize ourselves and our students into the conversation. For decades, we have combated deficit lenses with participatory action research, narrative inquiry, critical discourse analysis, and more. However, little attention has been given to children's spiritual activism. In our nation which has suffered tremendously from social injustice and intergenerational trauma, children remind us to look inward to begin the healing process.

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