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Building Solidarity through Collective Poetry: A Pedagogical Approach in Teacher Education



Minhye Son, Ed.D., Associate Professor,
Teacher Education Division, California
State University Dominguez Hills

Abstract

In response to the rising tide of xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments, fostering solidarity and resilience in educational spaces has become essential. This project explores the use of collective poetry as a pedagogical tool to cultivate community and resistance within a teacher education classroom at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Grounded in the framework of *comadrerismo*—centered on care, community-building, and advocacy—teacher candidates use a “Social Justice Cypher” activity to share their beliefs, struggles, and aspirations for social justice in education. Through poetic expressions, future teachers engage in critical discussions on identity, belonging, and resistance, fostering agency and empowerment. This project demonstrates how collective poetry not only enhances social and emotional learning but also supports teacher candidates in navigating and challenging oppressive sociopolitical forces.

Keywords: social justice cypher, teacher education, *comadrerismo*, collective poetry, solidarity, multilingual education

Introduction

In an era marked by heightened xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments, creating spaces that foster solidarity and resilience among teachers and learners has become essential. Educational settings, particularly those focused on teacher preparation, hold potential for cultivating agency and empowerment through community-driven practices. This project showcases how collective poetry, specifically through a “Social Justice Cypher” activity, serves as a pedagogical tool for fostering solidarity and resistance in a teacher education course at California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH).

In this context, the cypher (or cipher), rooted in hip-hop’s participatory culture, creates a communal, egalitarian space—typically arranged in a circle—where participants express themselves both individually and collectively through rapping, dancing, and other creative forms (Alim, 2009; Love, 2014; Lyiscott, 2019; Lyiscott et al., 2020; Petchauer, 2009; Spady et al., 2006). The cypher allows the community members to engage in open, expressive dialogue, thereby challenging conventional pedagogical norms and empowering teacher candidates to explore issues of identity, belonging, and justice (Love, 2014; Lyiscott, 2019; Wells, 2019).

Theoretical Framework: Comadrerismo in Education

Another central concept that we embraced in the course was comadrerismo, rooted in collective experience, emphasizing the importance of relationships, empathy, and mutual support. Centered on care, community-building, and advocacy, comadrerismo provides the theoretical foundation for this project (Fernandez & Stacy, 2023; Santoyo & Perez, 2023). This framework is particularly relevant in the current sociopolitical climate, where educational spaces are often sites of resistance against anti-immigrant and anti-multilingual ideologies. By centering care and community, comadrerismo cultivates emotional resilience and encourages individuals to openly share both challenges and achievements. Grounded in this ethos, the cypher activity aims to foster a space where teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds can share personal narratives, building solidarity and collective strength.

Background: The Social Justice Cypher and Its Origins

In 2021, the author participated in a “Social Justice Cypher” activity led by a critical literacy scholar Jamila Lyiscott at the Reimagining Education Summer Institute (RESI) at Teachers College, Columbia University (RESI, 2025). Dr. Lyiscott’s approach, which draws on hip-hop practices

rooted in West African traditions, encourages participants to share freestyle or written reflections over a beat (Lyiscott, 2019). Her method uses rhythm and community-based performance to amplify marginalized voices and foster critical conversations. Participants engage in dialogue, emotion, and self-expression to co-construct understanding and disrupt dominant narratives in education (Love, 2019). This activity emphasizes participants' rhetorical and lyrical skills, disrupting Eurocentric pedagogies, and expanding what is considered effective teaching (Alim, 2009). By allowing students to engage with their cultural identities, this method enriches the learning experience and transforms the classroom into an inclusive space.

Implementation of the Cypher Activity at CSUDH

Inspired by Dr. Lyiscott's cypher, the author adapted a similar activity using a "Rhyme Association Poetry" method in a teacher education course at CSUDH during the summer of 2023 (see Appendix for the assignment). The students, all teacher candidates, were encouraged to explore social justice themes by selecting their own anchor words—such as *change*, *equity*, and *opportunity*—to create their cyphers. The author, instructor of the course, provided the following assignment prompt: "Choose a social justice-oriented anchor word and write a six-line poem

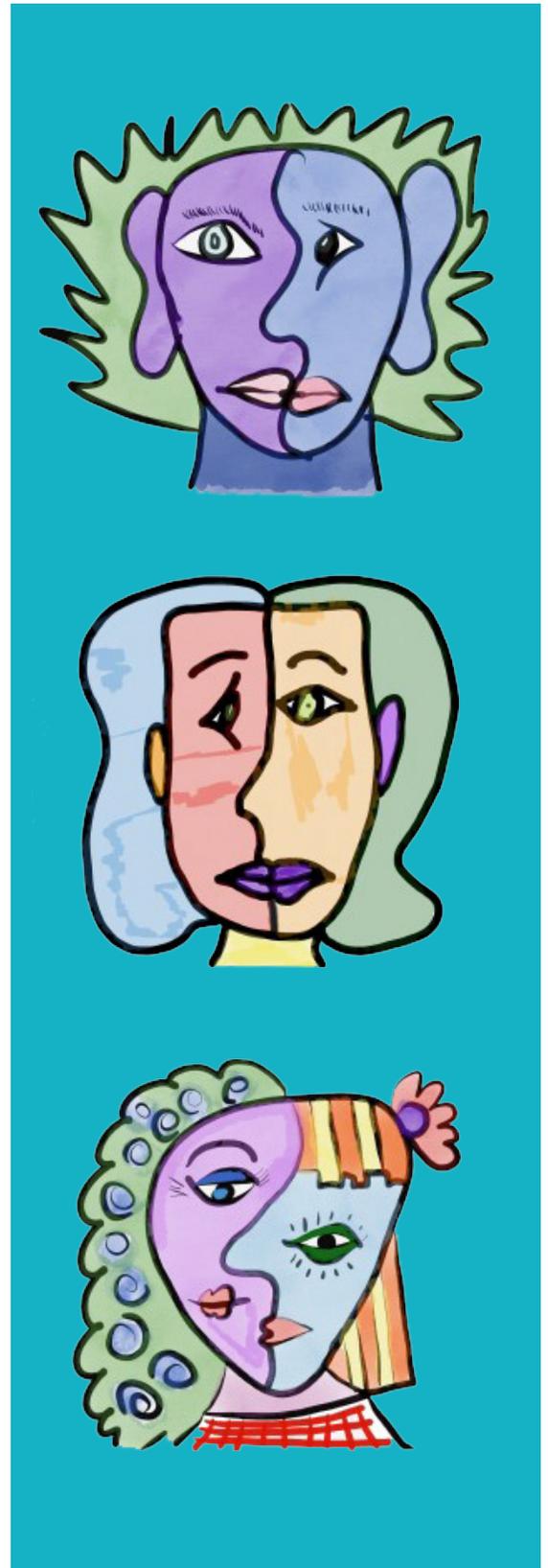
that reflects your personal or professional experiences, hopes, or concerns related to this word. Use any language(s) you are comfortable with, using the method".

Students were encouraged to use translanguaging, tapping into their full linguistic and cultural repertoires to express themselves (Son & Kim, 20224). Translanguaging refers to the dynamic use of multiple language features by emergent bilinguals and multilinguals to make meaning, challenge monolingual norms, and affirm their identities (García & Wei, 2015; Otheguy et al., 2015). Rather than separating languages, it embraces bilingualism as a fluid and empowering stance that values students' lived experiences as linguistic and cultural resources (Son & Kim, 20224). One way this came to life was through collective poetry activities that fostered communal and critical learning spaces.

Creating Communal and Critical Learning Spaces through Collective Poetry

The instructor first modeled creating a cypher by writing an anchor word on the board and generating six lines that either rhymed with or were meaningfully connected (thematically associated) with the anchor word, alternating between the two. The class then collaborated to create one cypher by coming up with an anchor word together, with students calling out

words or sentences while the instructor wrote that on the board. For homework, students then crafted their own individual cyphers. In the next session, we gathered in circles, where each student performed their cypher to a four-beat cadence while others cheered them on. These sessions emphasized community care through shared responsibilities and supportive feedback, reinforcing the joy of collective learning. The following poems, created and performed by teacher candidates, reflect the themes of identity, justice, and community that emerged through the cypher experience. The poems included here are not presented as research data but as illustrative artifacts of collective poetry pedagogy, shared with students' explicit consent and with identifying details removed to protect their privacy.



Collective Poetry

Adrianna

All we want is justice,
but we live in madness,
They think speaking languages is insanity,
But this class knows its commonality,
We see it every day,
and we know it is okay

Jeovanni

I want to learn-Yo quiero aprender
if you teach me right-tu me das todo el poder
se batalla mucho-getting here took all my might
pero me gradue-My degree was worth the fight
nos seguimos mejorando-so our kids won't have to struggle
generational wealth-we'll make sure to make it double!

Patricia

Talking about community cultural wealth
Capitals that add to your health
From social and linguistic to aspirational
Resistant and familial to navigational
Facing individuals, groups, and institutions with grace
Continuing to make strides at a steady pace

Yarelli

Throughout time people have fought for Human rights
But in present day society continues the fight
Humanity is divided by conflict
Just like political parties always contradict
It's time for change but who will take the challenge
It is a big task but we can heal the damage

Adriana

Left my home, call it immigration
The American Dream, in hope of transformation
30 years go by, and no modification
My throat so dry, I arrived at my location
Please try and put yourself in my position
All I want is for them to grant me my admission

Madeline

Education needs a change
It's all a lil deranged
New gen on the rise
We've got a lil surprise
Education is power
Look how we devour.

Pepe

We need to fight for equality
To achieve good life quality
So we enjoy peace and love
All around this beautiful globe
Nobody needs a Louis Vuitton
If we really promote educación

Gina

We fight for equality
It's top notch quality
We'll get it with time
We're in our prime
We hold the key
It's not time to flee

Daniel

You've Heard of Mathematics
It Deals With Quadratics
Multiplied By Itself, X^2
Just Don't Be Scared
I Know You're Frightened
But Let's Become Enlightened

Monica

I'm in the field of STEM
Historically for white men
Racial and gender oppression
Our work, robbed of possession
-DNA, nuclear fission
Our findings built on precision
Enduring indignities
By so-called scientist thieves
Now is the time to show
Gotta let your brilliance glow
You are one of a kind
Solutions awaiting to find

Gloria

Do not hesitate to aspire
Go forth and light your fire
Set a blaze that internal light
Do not cower in the night
It's easy to hide in darkness
But show a little madness

Annalisa

I've heard all you need in life is self-esteem
I'm still trying to get to what that might mean

Believe in yourself but don't be too proud
Cheer for yourself but don't make a crowd
Stand up for yourself but don't cause a fight
I'll just sit and stay quiet, am I doing this right?

Jose

Craving some new innovations
Show the world my creations
Need some inspiration for my building blocks
Clearing my head with some thrilling walks
I'm here to make my own path
But first I have to learn my math

Grace

Society needs more equality
Without racial bias subtlety
The new generation can learn fairness
They would just need some more awareness
Everyone with a different voice
This becomes a simple choice

Jennifer

We strive to learn and improve our minds,
To unlock potentials of all kinds
Education is more than just a degree,
It's a lifelong journey to become who we want to be
Shaping the leaders of tomorrow we foresee

Cristal

Some say it's a bad Affliction
When they can't understand your Diction
Even those who can't yet Read

Will grow up with the ability to Lead
Through the chaos they will bring Order
They are not weak because they crossed the border

Carlos

I'm worth more alive
Truth is that I doubt it
Social justice warrior
Social justice sacrifice
If it means something
I ain't scared of giving up my life

Maria

I was born to survive
Thank you mom and dad for the perfect guide
With direct instruction in my life
I learned to protect
And shield my path to success
Revealed is the truth as I am standing in front of you.

Kevin

You've heard of Dominguez Hills
The best students with all kinds of skills
We like to think critically and have fun
Don't forget to exercise in the sun
Believe in yourself because no one else will
So always when needed have a thrill

Efrain

We live in the land of opportunity
And we are part of a community.

All of us are one people,
Therefore we shall all be legal.
We have rights, we have freedom,
That is what gives us wisdom.

Karina

We as educators are committed to equity.
In all its complexity.
We fight for our students with love.
So that they can rise above.
We teach them to be brilliant.
And they show us that they're resilient.

Suzette

The main objective of the school is to create a community of wealth
and not let your community down.
Aspirational Capital is the hope and dreams of the future around.
Linguistic Capital are all the students of color with multiple communication skills in town.
Familial Capital will always be with you and never let you down.
And many more that you will learn.

Tamia

I am a visual learner.
Today's students are tomorrow's earner.
I have a lot to achieve.
There's no time to be naive.
Do not think I'm innocent.
I will be your equivalent :)

Sara

Student turn educator.
Will always be both.

Sara

Student turn educator.
Will always be both.
Learning and teaching
Seeking and reaching
It's the duo life.
Dual language
Duo stride
Up up
We thrive
Fly high
Like an eagle.



Though composed individually, the poems collectively represent the shared experiences of aspirations within the classroom. For example, Adrianna R., Yarelli, Pepe, Carlos, and Grace confronted inequality, and systemic oppression, emphasizing the role of educators' resistance and advocacy. In addition, Jeovanni, Suzette, Cristal, and Sara recognized multilingualism as power, resisting monolingual and monolithic ways of languaging. Finally, Patricia, Gina, Suzette, and Karina emphasized a deep sense of solidarity, shared struggle, and embodying the relational ethos of *comadrerismo* in practice. Taken together, the Social Justice Cypher illuminates how collective poetry, grounded in *comadrerismo*, can transform teacher education into a critical space to reflect, connect, and stand together for justice in education.

In the poetry circle, teacher candidates shared stories and drew strength from one another's identities, countering xenophobic rhetoric and affirming multilingualism and diversity (Alim, 2009; Kelly, 2013; Love, 2015) which led to these poems. Their poems embodied the values of *comadrerismo*—care, persistence, and community—and prompted deep reflection and metacognition around their learning and collective growth. Reflection and metacognition, key aspects of *comadrerismo*, became central as candidates assessed their learning and community-building experiences.

Reflections on Comadrerismo and Social Emotional Learning

After each performance, peers offered feedback, often connecting with lines that resonated personally (Kelly, 2013). These discussions sparked reflection and dialogue that went beyond the content of the poems, touching on shared experiences and dreams. Through this, the cypher became more than an artistic exercise; it was a space of reflection. This experience gave candidates a chance to reflect their identity, belonging, and resistance—topics that may be overlooked in traditional teacher education.

The transformative social and emotional learning fostered by the cypher activity extends beyond the boundaries of typical educational frameworks. As participants shared their poetic expressions, they explored complex questions of identity, belonging, and resilience. This reflective process supported their growth as educators and as individuals navigating a challenging sociopolitical landscape. Reflection within *comadrerismo*-based spaces tends to be holistic, addressing the emotional and relational dimensions of learning that are often overlooked in conventional education. These spaces provide essential support for teacher candidates facing adversity, fostering both personal and collective growth.

Implications for Teacher Education and Advocacy

The collective poetry created in this teacher education class at CSUDH embodies themes of resistance, communal strength, and aspirational visions for a better education. By highlighting the voices of teacher candidates, this project illustrates how comadrerismo-based practices counteract anti-multilingual policies and xenophobic sentiments. As teacher candidates share their struggles and hopes for the future of education, they are empowered to advocate for change within their communities. By cultivating spaces that value care, community, and advocacy, this pedagogical approach enables educators to build strength and endurance in the face of conservative attacks on multilingualism and diversity. This project highlights the importance of integrating culturally relevant and community-driven practices into teacher education, empowering future educators to transform their classrooms into inclusive, resilient spaces.

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