Teaching for Social Justice in Three Voices

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Abstract

In today's neoliberal educational climate that puts privatization and profit above children and learning, critical pedagogies are sorely needed so that schools may instead serve as vehicles for social change. Data from research using grounded theory methods with eight P-12 critical educators across the United States were used to construct a framework for teaching for social justice. This framework consists of listening to students' voices, inserting missing voices, and co-constructing agentic voices.

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In my previous work (Ritchie, 2012), I have employed a metaphor of incubation to characterize the developmental process through which many educators undergo as they take on more and more of a critical or politicized view of the world, a view that involves seeing things from a systemic (e.g. poverty) rather than individualized (e.g. laziness) perspective. In this paper, I turn to the ways in which P-12 teachers help foster a process through which P-12 children undergo as they become politicized and engage in a systemic sociopolitical analysis alongside their teachers. I make the argument that there are three necessary components to teaching for social justice, which I call listening to students' voices, inserting missing voices, and co-constructing agentic voices.

Background of the Problem

P-12 education in the United States has the potential to help students become active participants in a democracy and serve as a means of achieving greater equity and justice in society. However, societal indicators affected by P-12 education show just the opposite. For example, while some students show gains in standardized test scores and some schools and districts show decreasing performance gaps between various demographic student groups, fewer students are prepared for the innovation and creativity demanded by the job market, likely because the school curriculum increasingly emphasizes the memorization of discrete facts over teaching for deep understanding (Council on Competitiveness, 2004; NCEE, 2007). K-12 racial achievement gaps persist in spite of No Child Left Behind, which promised to close them by 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Fewer Americans participate civically in society (Glickman, 2003; National Conference on Citizenship, 2006; Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America, 2000). Finally, there is increasingly greater disparity between socioeconomic classes in the United States (Feller & Stone, 2009; Mishel, 2006) —with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. In fact, recent data (Saez, 2013) show that Americans with the top 0.01% of incomes have the greatest share of all personal income in the U.S. since 1917.

Neoliberal and neoconservative "reformers" (typically individuals and entities who come from business rather than education such as the Gates, Broad, or Walton Family Foundations) have co-opted the language of equity and justice (Greene, 2008) in the push for market-based approaches to education that increase profits for book publishing companies, hedge funds, private philanthropists, and private foundations promoting charter schools. Instead of greater equity and justice, what we are seeing is that policies such as the "Race to the Top" in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) exacerbate inequalities. These policies produce citizens who lack creativity, innovation, deep understanding of content knowledge, and critical thinking

skills; have had little experience and training in collaboration, working as a team, and getting along with others; and who are taught that society is organized by individual meritocracy rather than a collective common good in which all members participate, resulting in a lack of concern for and trust in others.

In an educational climate such as this, it is vital to understand and learn from teachers who offer a critical counter-narrative. While most U.S. schools wittingly or unwittingly reproduce the status quo (Darder, 2002; Freire, 2004), what educators in other parts of the world have called the "default mode of schooling" (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006), many P-12 teachers within these schools critique the detrimental effects of business as usual, teaching students to be problem-posers and solvers, independent and critical thinkers, creative innovators, democratic collaborators, politically active citizens, and agents in charge of transforming their world. These teachers who enact critical pedagogies and social justice education offer other teachers insight into pedagogies that embrace and sustain a progressive, democratic vision of education and society. While critical pedagogies alone cannot address the concerns mentioned above, they provide at least one important means of effecting change. By raising generations of students who recognize their own strengths, see multiple perspectives, understand power and privilege, and are able to lead based on the common good rather than their own narrow self-interests, teachers and communities enacting social justice education have the potential to address societal inequities and effect meaningful change. In this paper, I define social justice using a framework articulated by Bell (2007):

> Social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure…social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live…the goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in their institutions and communities of which they are a part. (pp. 3-4)

Educators who teach for social justice enact "critical" pedagogies whose aim is equality, justice, and full participation of all members in a democratic society.

In what follows, I use data gathered from a series of interviews with eight critically-minded U.S. educators to generate a construct of teaching for social justice. I start by describing a theoretical framework based on the work of Paulo Freire and his contemporaries. Next, I explain the methodological procedures I used in conducting the study. Then I share a model generated from the interview data, making the argument that listening to student's voices inserting missing voices, and co-constructing agentic voices are three necessary and inter-related components of social justice education. I close with implications for teaching and teacher education for social justice.

Freirean Critical Pedagogical Framework

Paulo Freire (1970/2005, 1974/2005, 1997, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987) argued that before we teach students specific content by reading the *word*, we must teach them to read their own socio-historical-political context by reading the *world*. Freire (1997) wrote, "It is impossible to access meaning simply through reading words. One must first read the world within which these words exist" (p. 304). Following Freire, many educators who enact critical pedagogies start their teaching with a focus on getting to know the world of their learners (Comber, 2001; Cowhey, 2006; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Jones, 2006). Knowing their students allows critical educators to find ways to contextualize the learning based on students' interests, helping students find and seek out relevance and meaning. This contextualization helps critical educators teach their discipline well, whether it is the general studies of early childhood and elementary school or specific content areas in middle or high school. In addition to teaching content effectively, the critical educator must go further and "not only teach his or her discipline well, but he or she must also challenge the learner to critically think through the social, political, and historic reality within which he or she is a presence" (Freire, 2004, p. 19).

Reading the word through the world is a dialogic, recursive process, where each continually implies the other. While it is important for educators to start with the world of their students in order to better teach the word, merely doing so can preserve the inequitable, undemocratic ends of the status quo just as much as teaching the content in a decontextualized, transmission or banking approach such as including more multicultural literature and then using it to teach skills and test preparation without an interrogation of power and privilege (Freire, 1970/2005; Ritchie, 2013). As students learn to apply the techniques and understandings of each discipline learned in school, critical teachers help them use this new content knowledge to think critically about the social, political, and historic realities in which they live. Freire (2004) noted, "The progressive educator…never accepts that the teaching of any discipline whatsoever

could take place divorced from a critical analysis of how society works" (p. 20). These two—the word and the world—go hand in hand and should be taught in tandem.

By fostering the development of students' critical analysis of society, critical pedagogy "challenges us to recognize, engage, and critique (so as to transform) any existing undemocratic social practices and institutional structures that produce and sustain inequalities and oppressive social identities and relations" (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996, p. 2). The point is not simply to engage in a sociopolitical critique of the learner's world but to also to move toward transforming injustice. As Freire and Macedo (1987) argued, "[R]eading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* or *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work" (p. 35).

Reading the world, a sociopolitical analysis from a structural viewpoint, sets critical pedagogy and social justice education apart from other forms of multicultural education. Sleeter and Delgado Bernal (2004) wrote, "Within multicultural education, curriculum is often discussed in terms of *bias*, a concept that does not necessarily lead to an analysis of power and consciousness" (p. 242; emphasis added). Similarly, Howard and Aleman (2008) maintained that critical educational theorists "differ from many multicultural education scholars in that they do not see individual prejudice or ignorance as the problem in education, but rather that it is the systemic institutionalization of such prejudice which allows it to remain hidden and thriving" (p. 166).

By paying attention to power relations in society, critical educators are able to address individual prejudice while also looking at the structural conditions leading to prejudice and bias that maintain inequity. Freire (1998, 2004) argued that teaching students to read their world and analyze structural inequities makes possible the ability to intervene and act for social change. Just as the cycle of reading the word and world is recursive, so is the cycle of action and reflection, or critical praxis (Freire 1970/2005). If we limit our work to reflecting on or critiquing the world without acting on our new insights, we are restricted to verbalism, which denies praxis. "One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice," Freire (1998) emphasized, "is to make possible the conditions in which the learners…*engage* in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons" (p. 45; emphasis added). Yet, he also cautioned against acting too fast and sacrificing reflective analysis, which some social justice educators might do in their haste to effect change. Similar to the verbalism characterized by mere reflection without action, Freire (1970/2005) also critiqued activism, which he considered to be action without reflection, arguing that: "action for action's sake . . . negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible" (p. 88).

Various scholars have critiqued Freire's work for sexist language and an emphasis on social class over gender, race, and sexual identity (Darder, 2002; Gore, 1991; Luke & Gore, 1992; Weiler, 1991). In his later writings, Freire apologized to his critics for neglecting differences among race, gender, sexual identity, and other minoritized categories. My drawing upon Freire's work is not intended to endorse a view that silences or minimizes any social group or that essentializes oppression, and my reading of Freire's later work suggests that Freire also did not have this intention. In fact, Freire reproached those who read and critiqued *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* without examining ways in which his writing evolved over time. Additionally, feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1994) refuted claims that Freire's work should be dismissed because of instances of male privilege in his earlier work.

Methodology

In this qualitative interview study, I wanted to investigate some of the various critical pedagogical practices that P-12 educators enacted with their students. As a former community organizer, activist, and social justice educator, I was interested in exploring what teachers were doing across the country to help students in public schools understand social issues and become agents of change in their communities. I also particularly wanted to see what, if any, practices these teachers had in common that could be shared with new generations of teachers, especially teachers who come from politically conservative backgrounds like my own and like many of the teacher education students I have taught.

Trying to avoid the objectivism and scientism that accompanies much educational research (Gitlin & Russell, 1994; Hyslop-Marigon & Asleem, 2007; Macedo, 1998), I sought to find a research methodology that fit with my Freirean dialogic theoretical framework. Seidman's (2006) series of in-depth interviews offered a chance for participants to reflect on the lived experience of their teaching while also allowing a dialogue between researcher and participants whose intent was "not to discover absolutes, or 'the truth,' but to scrutinize normative 'truths' that are embedded in a specific historical and cultural context" (Gitlin & Russell, 1994, p. 185). Thus, Seidman's framework offered a useful construct for in-depth interviewing. While I have reported elsewhere what influenced these teachers to teach critically (Ritchie, 2012), in this paper I focus on their critical teaching practices.

Research Participants

To locate potential participants for the study, my initial sampling procedures consisted of applying the following criteria:

- Currently a preschool, elementary, middle, or high school teacher (up through grade 12) in the United States

- Teacher has been identified, either by self or others, as enacting critical pedagogy or teaching for social justice
- A description of the teacher's work has been published in book(s) or journal article(s) in the past ten years

Once a sample had been generated by applying these criteria, I made further refinements based on the following: geographic location; demographic diversity in terms of age, years teaching, gender, race/ethnicity, U.S. region, urban/suburban/rural type of city, and school; and student demographics, to ensure wide variation of sample. Using a purposive and snowball sampling strategy (Patton, 2002), I identified participants through published works in edited books (*Making Justice Our Project; Teaching for Social Justice; No Deposit, No Return; Controversies in the Classroom; Rethinking Our Classrooms*) and journals (*Rethinking Schools; Radical Teacher; Teaching Tolerance*) about critical pedagogy and teaching for social justice as well as existing networks of critical educators such as the National Writing Project and Rethinking Schools. A total of eight teachers participated (Table 1), and all have given permission to use their real names and other identifiers.

Table 1. Demographic information for U.S. critical educator study participants.

Name	Location	Grade Taught	Gender	Age	Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity	Years Teaching Experience
Jennifer Aaron	New York, NY	Elementary	F	37	White/European American	12
Bill Bigelow	Portland, OR	High School	M	58	European American	30
Lisa Espinosa	Chicago, IL	Middle School	F	35	Latina	9
Mark Hansen	Portland, OR	Elementary	M	37	American	10
Terry Moore	Tenafly, NJ	Elementary	M	59	Caucasian	33
Hyung Nam	Portland, OR	High School	M	41	Korean American	12
Ann Pelo	Seattle, WA	Preschool	F	45	White	20
Maria Sweeney	Ridgewood, NJ	Elementary	F	49	Irish/German/ Yugoslavian American	25

Data Collection

I conducted a series of three in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with each participant for approximately 90 minutes per interview. For the first and second interviews, I traveled to participants' homes, classrooms, and local restaurants so we could speak face-to-face. The first interview focused on current teaching practices while the second interview addressed life history and other experiences leading teachers to teach critically. Before the third interview, I sent participants transcripts of the first two interviews as well as my preliminary analysis, and we used the third interview as a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The third interview occurred via telephone a few weeks after the first two sessions and provided the participants an opportunity to add, refute, or revise anything they felt to be important. All interview sessions were a dialogue between researcher and participants, with additional

communication via email and telephone in which participants added further details left out of initial interviews and responded to my analysis for clarification and accuracy.

Data Analysis

Because I wanted to draw out patterns and themes that might help current and future critical teachers and teacher educators, I initially analyzed interview data using an inductive thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002). I tried to honor an emic perspective as much as possible (Patton, 2002) in order to identify patterns, categories, and themes using the participants' own words and constructs. I was interested in extracting any common experiences among participants that may have implications for social justice education while simultaneously acknowledging tensions or disruptions in the data.

I started the analytical process by becoming familiar with the data. I listened to the interview recordings several times, and I reviewed and re-reviewed my notes to get a complete picture of the range of data. I transcribed the interview conversations, often listening to the audio-recordings repeatedly to ensure my transcription was accurate. I then generated open codes and manually applied them throughout the transcripts.

After I systematically applied open codes to the dataset, I grouped the codes into categories that cohered or clustered together through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I cut apart the entire data set and reorganized it by collating data into categories. Next, I started to develop themes by collapsing categories into each other and evaluating them for internal and external homogeneity (Patton, 2002). Once I had a map of the categories and themes, I assessed this map to ensure that the themes were not redundant and accounted for all data.

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Teaching for Social Justice in Three Voices

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While the notion of "voice" has been problematized by scholars writing from poststructuralist perspectives (e.g. Jackson, 2003), I hope that my deployment of the term neither presumes an essentialized, stable subject who speaks and listens transparently through voice nor a fixed and stable meaning that is "made" or transmitted as a result of the voices presented here. I use "voice" as these critical educators used it: as an *identity* (Ann: "anti-bias work within early childhood has been…so dominated by a handful of voices"); as a *perspective or lens* through which one views the world (Hyung: "Where are the women's voices?"); and as a *sense of agency or self-efficacy* (Terry: "They learned that every citizen has a role, has a voice.").

In the pages that follow, I will elaborate on each of these components, provide examples from U.S. critical educators in grades P-12, and show how these components interconnect to form a model of critical pedagogical practices. While my aim here is to extract commonalities

across a range of teachers rather than illustrating specific pedagogical strategies or techniques, I do provide some concrete examples for readers interested in how to teach critically. I also refer readers to the rich array of published accounts of these teachers' work in *Rethinking Schools* publications, *Radical Teacher* magazine, and others (see Selected Participant Publications).

Listening to Students' Voices

I try to make it relevant. So many kids at this age are so disconnected from school. It's like, "It's so boring. It's so dumb! What is this teaching us?" Even those we would call the good students, even the ones who are successful, getting A's or whatever, fine, they're going to do it, but very rarely are they really engaged in the classroom.

–Lisa Espinosa

The critical educators I had the opportunity to speak with develop their pedagogy by getting to know their students and students' worlds in order to build a bridge between their students and the formal curriculum. This involves loving or adoring one's students, approaching children from an asset rather than deficit perspective, and developing a caring relationship with them. It also entails taking inventory of children's prior experiences and interests so that the critical educator can adapt the curriculum and make it relevant to students by creating multiple entry points for them to engage with the content matter. Listening to students' voices makes it easier to do more difficult critical work later because trust has been built from the start.

Taking an empathic, loving stance toward one's students is an important initial step in being able to hear their voices (Noddings, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Maria Sweeney, an elementary school teacher in Ridgewood, New Jersey, argued that we should love and adore our students as much as possible:

> I just think a huge part of teaching is falling in love with them. Just loving them so much . . . If you can't love them, you have to just adore them, you have to find a way to adore your kids. Because otherwise, you're just not going to be able to do it. So that's one thing: I just adore the kids that I work with. And I never give up on them. Never. If most people look at Sophia's reading, they would be like, "Whoa, half the time she reads 'saw' as 'was!'" I'm like, "Half the time she reads 'was' as 'was!' And tomorrow it will be 60% of the time."

As Freire (1970/2005, 2004) argued, we are all in a state of becoming. Maria and the other critical educators recognize this by noticing the positive in each child and building their teaching from children's strengths. Because teaching in general and teaching for social justice in particular are difficult jobs, knowing and appreciating one's students establishes a necessary

and important beginning framework upon which to later build. Due to the fact that critical teaching entails investigating counter-discourses that disrupt the normative and hegemonic metanarratives espoused by traditional curricula, truly listening to students—i.e. maintaining rapport with them from an asset perspective – prepares critical educators for the challenges that lie ahead while eliciting student engagement.

These critical educators listen not only to their students' voices but also to the voices of the parents and caregivers of their students. Lisa Espinosa, a middle school teacher in Chicago, expressed the importance of not judging parents:

> I know sometimes you are busy, and yes, you will have those parents who are not being the best parents possible, but my experience is by far most parents are doing the best they can. They're doing the best they can. And when we sit and judge, it's easy for us to judge from an outside perspective, "Oh how could they do this?" but then when you're in that situation, you get it. You would make those choices, too.

Reframing deficit perspectives toward parents and caregivers in today's schools is no easy feat, but as Lisa and the other critical educators demonstrated, it is important to empathize with parents and hear their voices. Furthermore, when parents feel a teacher listens to them and understands their perspective, they have an increased tolerance for and/or appreciation of teaching that disrupts the status quo. These teachers remarked about how the credibility they established early on with parents allowed them to take on issues that would typically be too controversial without the existence of such relationships.

There are several ways in which these critical educators get to know their students and caregivers. One way is to engage the class in community building activities in which students and teachers get to know each other and develop a sense of collectivity and democratic learning. Schniedewind and Davidson's (2006) book *Open Minds to Equality* is one resource these educators use for lessons on building trust, communication, and cooperation. Student writing also provides a window into the lives of children. While some children may be reticent to open up verbally, they may be more inclined to do so in writing, as these critical educators have found. Another approach is the use of interviews, both of students and their family members. These teachers get to know their students by sitting down with them and asking questions about their interests and goals as learners. They send home questionnaires to parents to determine their hopes and dreams for their child's education, as well as their home literacies. Additionally, they make home visits and visits to children's out-of-school events, whether it is sports games, dance recitals, taking a group of kids to the movies, or meeting up with students and their

families at activist events such as marches or candlelight vigils. When combined with traditional forms of assessment (such as records from previous years, standardized and classroom-based assessments, writing assignments, etc.), these more personalized means of listening to students' voices can present a holistic, comprehensive portrait of the child as a learner and human being.

Developing rapport with their students and getting to know them as individuals positions critical educators to make the content responsive and relevant to students' interests and needs. Listening to children and their parents allows a critical educator to make her or his teaching culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012), and based on children's and communities' funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Armed with an intimate knowledge of the child and the curriculum (Dewey, 1902/1976), the critical educator actively seeks ways to bridge the two in a meaningful, authentic way. But more than this, critical educators also insert missing voices into their teaching to move students from an individualistic micro-perspective toward a systemic macro-perspective so that ultimately they may find ways to intervene in their world in ways that benefit all humans.

Inserting Missing Voices

I think that everyone should have an opportunity to learn. No matter what social class, it's your right as a human being to have a clue, to have some idea, of what's going on in the world. It's your right to develop empathy, and it's your right to experience democracy. It's your right to learn that the way to live well is to work for the common good and to make the world better.

– Maria Sweeney

Students enrolled in U.S. schools, by and large, are fed a steady diet of mainstream curriculum from preschool to 12th grade or longer. Although some textbook publishers and other producers of curricular resources have added more Black and Brown faces to their materials in recent years, the normative gaze of the curriculum continues to privilege the same social identity categories: White, European American, monolingual English-speaking, heterosexual, cisgender, male, Christian, middle to upper class, able-bodied, etc. It is unfortunate that students are not made privy to voices outside this normative gaze within the formal curriculum, and it is imperative for critical educators to provide those voices. Yet, the mainstream curricula are not only excluding the voices of *people*, but they are also removing or silencing a systemic, sociopolitical perspective – the voice of power, privilege, and oppression.

Ann, a preschool teacher, discussed the importance, even with very young children, of listening to other people's perspectives:

You know, a three-year-old isn't going to come out of an in-depth study ready to go take on the WTO [World Trade Organization]. But they are going to come out with the notion that there are multiple perspectives and that part of our work as humans on this planet is to engage with multiple perspectives and be willing to be changed. And, oh my God, that disposition alone . . . isn't that what the U.N. is supposed to be about?

Ann and other critical educators inserted new voices and perspectives through literature, media, and other texts, as well as pedagogical activities, such as role plays and debates, to affirm the identities of members of groups who have been traditionally disenfranchised from the formal curriculum and to offer alternative perspectives that will help students work toward a vision of the common good.

Literature can serve as a resource for hearing voices that have been systemically omitted from mainstream curricula. Ann reads aloud *The Trumpet of the Swan* to her preschoolers, but she changes the main characters from a male-female couple to a female-female couple to make sure children have the opportunity to challenge heteronormativity and see that all families are valid. Mark reads *And Tango Makes Three* and other books to his class for the same reason. Terry fills his room with children's literature on a range of social issues so that his third graders in an affluent community have numerous opportunities to hear missing voices, especially those that offer a sociopolitical perspective. One particular strategy he employs is to have his students contrast the story of Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of America with the accounts told in the Taínos' perspective by Michael Dorris and Jane Yolen. Lisa teaches her students to interrogate stereotypes of African Americans, Latin@s[1], and Native Americans by having them explore multimedia texts, including fiction and nonfiction books such as *Our America*, *The Circuit*, and *Heart of a Chief*; films such as *Ethnic Notions*; and photography books such as *Shooting Back from the Reservation*. Lastly, Jennifer has students critique television commercials for gender, race, and ethnicity stereotypes.

Sometimes the missing voices these critical educators insert are their own. For example, when Lisa finds her Latin@ students struggling with racism toward other groups, she shares a personal account of how as a child she heard her parents make racist remarks. She shares how they didn't understand the impact of what they were saying and the connection between their prejudice toward others and others' prejudice and racism toward their own ethnic group. Mark also shares personal information about his reasons for not being married. He wants his

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[1] This term is inclusive of both the feminine "Latina" and the masculine "Latino".

elementary school students to know that he and his partner have chosen not to participate in an institution that discriminates against gay and lesbian couples.

In addition to using literature, multimedia texts, and their own voices, these critical educators also engage their students in experiential educational activities designed to provoke an awareness of voices that have been excluded. For example, Bill has developed numerous role plays that reinsert historical actors and groups of people into events that have been whitewashed by corporate textbook publishers. He shared how he created a role play about the Seneca Falls Convention:

> And we had done a huge role play that I've never published[2] on the Seneca Falls, the 1848 gathering, the first time women got together in this country to demand their rights as women. Eighteen forty-eight was the last year of the U.S. war against Mexico, and what I did in the role play was, instead of just having the middle and upper class reformers, White women, I invited conquered women in New Mexico, Cherokee women who had been moved from the Trail of Tears; I included enslaved African American women. All these women came together. So the question was what if there had been a more representative assembly of women, what kind of demands would they have come up with?

Role plays allow Bill and the others to have students put themselves into the shoes of various "unsung heroes" left out of the traditional curriculum and see what happens when everyone's voice is heard. Other experiential approaches include simulations, debates, games, interior monologues, and theater. Including missing voices precipitates inserting the voice of a missing sociopolitical analysis, an analysis that is omitted by the education system and that functions to maintain inequitable power relations. Inserting these voices throughout the curriculum and school year helps students see links between the systematic marginalization and disenfranchisement of various social groups. While some teachers experienced pushback when instilling sociopolitical awareness, they also identified strategic ways to minimize or overcome resistance (see Tensions section below). The development of students' sociopolitical analysis, what Freire (2005) might call *critical consciousness*, positions students for taking agency and intervening in their world in order to transform it.

Co-Constructing Agentic Voices

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[2] This role play has since been published at http://zinnedproject.org/materials/seneca-falls/

It's important to know the problem, find out what the problem is, and then how can you make it better? And I feel like most school systems stop there. There's a problem; let's raise money for it. Not, what is really the problem? Who are the people really involved in the problem? Who's profiting from the problem or not profiting from the problem? And most importantly, how can you change that either in a small way or in a systemic way?

--Terry Moore

The critical educators I interviewed and their students collaboratively start each school year with their students' backgrounds and the voices they bring to the classroom. They then move outward from there by inserting additional voices of those who have been excluded from the formal curriculum and synthesizing the various voices in ways that lead to new understandings about social systems from a power perspective. Collectively, they begin to co-construct agency to effect change. By teaching students to see from a macro-perspective and also seeking opportunities for them to act on their new, more global perspective, critical educators help students insert their own agentic voice into the world as they denounce oppressive structures and announce new ways of being that are humane and just (Freire, 2004).

As students read their world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) by recognizing how society privileges certain voices and silences others, the need for greater equity and justice becomes apparent. The role of the critical educator at this point becomes one of helping students to co-construct agency so they may address injustice. Bill elaborated on his belief in instilling a sense of self-efficacy in students:

> I want kids to ultimately believe in their own efficacy . . . that in any given moment, particularly now, we're confronted with a series of choices and how we decide to handle those choices, that's the world we get. And so I want kids to come out of class and to think of themselves as activists, to think of themselves as people who can make a difference in the world.

Hyung concurred, saying he tries to help his students assume agency because:

> Anything good we have in our country, it didn't come because we have benevolent politicians or leaders that did this for us. It was despite them; it was ordinary people like us who confronted these issues and demanded that things change.

Creating in-class and out-of-class experiences that help position students as agentic actors capable of transforming their world is an important part of these teachers' critical pedagogies.

We have seen how role plays help add voices to the curriculum that are traditionally silenced, a form of problem-posing education that gives students opportunities to question whose "truth" gets told and why and to recognize that knowledge is socially constructed. Role playing can also put students in positions where they may experience what it means to effect change through their own agency. By taking on roles that are typically given very little attention or are left out of literature and history books, students reimagine and start to rewrite the world as agentic actors.

Besides role plays, these critical educators use simulations and other hands-on approaches that demonstrate viscerally how structural forces such as capitalism work. For instance, Maria teaches students about many forms of oppression through texts and activities that teach the "isms" (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, etc.). She and her students study and critique various examples of injustice throughout the year, and then at the end of the year, they collaboratively choose one particular issue to study in more detail so they may perform it in a play for the entire school. By researching, writing, and acting plays as well as writing letters and engaging in civic action around social injustices, Maria's students take civic responsibility and experience participating in a democracy. Meanwhile, Ann engages children in in-depth studies in which they interrogate through play, systemic issues such as sexism, racism, or competitive individualism. One year, the children she worked with were not playing fair with Legos, with certain kids' claiming the most valuable pieces for themselves. Ann and her colleagues took away all the Legos, engaged the children in a resource distribution game that mimics how capitalism works, and led them through a rule-making process that ended in a collective process that benefits the common good. Likewise, Terry advises an after-school club that explores issues such as hunger or peace and war throughout the year and engages in taking action around the issue. Using materials from Oxfam, Terry and his students use their detailed sociopolitical analysis about the root causes of issues as inspiration for taking action.

These critical educators particularly emphasized the need to understand the complexity of an issue before jumping into action. Bill discussed a problem with what Freire (1970/2005) referred to as activism at the expense of critical reflection. Bill commented, "One of the problems I see in how some people interpret social justice teaching is that they have a bit of a checklist. So at the end of every unit, students are supposed to 'make a difference.'" Rather than having students take action on every issue they explore, he prefers not only to give students opportunities to go deeply into an issue but also to give students choice so that they take action on something they really care about. Meanwhile, Ann argued that it is important to see the complexity in issues beyond, "'We have money, they don't. Give them money.'" She

added, "I try always to choose that. How can I make it more complicated and at the same time create an opportunity for kids to have some sense of efficacy or action?" In a similar vein, Terry asserted,

> I don't want to, frankly, collect pennies for pets, things like that . . . You know, if they did a pennies for pets and find out why do we have to raise money for pets and why are they being abandoned, why are they being abused, who's profiting from it, you've got something. I'm on your side. But that's not the way it works; it's let's collect pennies for pets and then we're done. Or the blankets for the Afghans when the big earthquake hit. You know, let's raise the money, let's send blankets over to the Afghans, and we're done. Well, why are these Afghans caught up in the mountains? I don't care what you do, look further into it. Every single thing merits it.

More than just teaching children to take action and move on to a new topic, these educators teach their students to investigate social problems in their full complexity so that they may work toward lasting change rather than Band-Aid solutions.

Mark uses children's literature to model persuasive writing and then gives his students opportunities to investigate issues they would like to change in their communities. One year this meant looking at how a historically Black housing project, the Columbia Villa in Portland, Oregon, would be bulldozed and razed. His students researched the community, drew maps, memorialized certain community assets they wanted to preserve, and met with and wrote letters to government officials in charge of the redevelopment. Jennifer also takes inventories of what children and their families perceive to be community concerns. She turns her class' analysis of social and political issues into an opportunity for action, whether it addresses building a community garden, ensuring trash cans are readily visible and accessible on city streets, or other concerns. Lisa's students interrogate the connections between racism against Latin@s, African Americans, and Native Americans to see how each group has been "othered" and how instead of letting society (mis)represent them, they may take agency and represent themselves through photo essays and other means.

What these critical educators have in common is their attention to using children's sociopolitical awareness and understanding of complex issues as a means of taking agency and effecting change. These teachers co-construct agentic voices with their students by providing opportunities for children to act on their new understandings in ways that benefit all of humanity rather than certain privileged groups. Taking action for social justice based on a sociopolitical

analysis of complex issues offers possibilities that instill hope and a sense of efficacy for students, moving from deconstruction to reconstruction.

Tensions

Enacting critical pedagogies is not always easy. This section takes a look at some of the difficulties or tensions that arise when teaching for social justice in P-12 classrooms. First, even after spending a lot of time listening to the voices of children and families and developing relationships with them, sometimes teachers are still reluctant to endorse fully a critical approach. Students sometimes resist or take a stance against the curriculum and pedagogy of critical educators. Several participants discussed how they teach their students to "talk back," even to them. Bill articulated it well: "A teacher can't do that challenging and encouraging of all that talking back and not expect some of it to come back on you."

Further, there is a tension between maintaining a critical stance and listening to parents who challenge what is occurring in the classroom. When listening to parents' voices, sometimes it becomes apparent that parents may not want their child to participate in certain activities deemed too political or controversial. Terry experienced this firsthand when his afterschool club, World Improvement by Tenafly Students (WITS), after learning about both sides and debating about the War in Iraq, decided to take a stand against it. While most parents were fine with the stance the club took, some parents supported the war and did not want their children to participate in vigils or protests or to collaborate with Military Families Speak Out (http://www.mfso.org), a group composed of military families who took a stance against the War in Iraq and War in Afghanistan. Terry found a serendipitous solution when he discovered that the vigils were being held close to a food bank for the military. His group reached out to the food bank and started collecting diapers, formula, and food donations, easing the concerns of disgruntled parents. While solutions like this may not be readily apparent, these educators discussed the need to always present both sides of an issue and to make room for dissent.

Maria encountered parental resistance to some of the plays she had her students perform. One year, when her students decided to perform a play about the Paterson, NJ Silk Strike, a parent objected to letting her daughter take a role in the play. Because she wanted to find a way for the child to participate, Maria negotiated with the parent, and the mother decided to allow the child to compile the scripts that each small group had written into the final play, a role that Maria normally did herself. Another year, when the class decided to put on a play about child labor and Nike/Disney sweatshops, Maria let a student play the role of Nike CEO Phil Knight when his parents thought the material was too controversial.

These critical educators discussed how they earned credibility with parents and students by listening to their voices early on in the year and adjusting their teaching accordingly. This responsiveness helped establish a positive relationship early that they could draw upon when controversial issues came up. These educators also reflected on how their reputation as effective teachers earned them a certain level of respect that allowed them to take on more contentious subject matter. When parents see that their children are learning a lot and are engaged in school, they are more inclined to put up with societal critique that may challenge their own beliefs.

Freire (1998, 2004) argued that teaching is political. While these educators recognized this, they also articulated how it is important to avoid indoctrinating students. Listening to missing voices and investigating reasons why those voices are missing is an important step in facilitating children's critical capacities. In fact, these critical educators argued that students get so many years of a view of the world that upholds a heterosexist, "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2009, p. 15) that it is their job to offer a counter-narrative. But the critical educator must not, in her or his haste to insert missing voices, pretend that master narratives or "big D" Discourses (Gee, 1990) do not exist and that as members of a normative society, students and their families have not internalized some of these messages. These teachers' goal is to offer a critical interrogation of the complexity behind why certain perspectives uphold values such as democracy, equality, and justice while avoiding a simple replacement of one metanarrative with another. Thus, critical educators must constantly navigate this tension and pay attention to signs that students are simply parroting the views of someone else, including the teacher.

For example, this tension came up for Lisa when she first showed the film *Ethnic Notions* to her students as a way of introducing the ways in which the media stereotypes certain racial and ethnic groups. Lisa was dismayed to see her students laugh at the caricatures of Black people, especially considering that her students were Latin@. Lisa used such student feedback to generate new curriculum around representations, and she made deliberate efforts to show students the connection between the oppression of African Americans and the oppression of Latin@s and other people of color.

Another tension critical educators face is striving for a balance between teaching with critical pedagogies and working explicitly to raise students' achievement on high-stakes standardized tests. Participants emphasized how social justice education takes more work, but that it is worth the extra effort. Mark expressed this when he said, "To be a good teacher, let alone a good social justice teacher, is a *lot* of work. . . . It's work I would rather do than scoring

worksheets or stapling packets, but it's consuming." Bill argued that taking the "easy" way out by teaching curriculum based only on test preparation oversimplifies complex issues. For example, when Bill's students had inserted the missing voices of the women present at the Seneca Falls Convention, his students came up with their own list of demands and compared them with the Declaration of Sentiments that the convention attendees drafted. His students had learned a lot about the conditions of women in the 19th century. However, Bill challenged whether or not standardized tests could measure this learning, stating, "But could they have answered what amendment established women's right to vote? Maybe not. That's because it was a Trivial Pursuit question and we had not done a Trivial Pursuit curriculum." In fact, Bill engaged in activism against trivializing the curriculum because he, like many critical educators, knew his students understood issues from a level of complexity not measurable on multiple-choice tests. While these educators discussed their resistance to top-down curricular mandates and a hyper-focus on tests (including writing letters to newspapers, walking out of staff meetings during songs about Adequate Yearly Progress sung to the tune of Kumbaya, etc.), they also expressed various ways in which they teach a social justice curriculum that addresses skills and standards. Through their own creativity, critical educators find ways to bridge sociopolitical analysis into the formal curriculum. In fact, it may be their politicization before becoming teachers that helps them maintain an unwavering commitment to education for social justice (Ritchie, 2012), as Maria described: "In my mind I worked to shape every single aspect of the day into some kind of a lesson on working for the common good or social justice."

Toward a New Understanding of Teaching for Social Justice

As we have seen, these critical educators listen to students' voices, insert missing voices, and co-construct agentic voices with their students. While this research is limited to these eight particular critical educators in U.S. classrooms, the results have a broader applicability to teachers who are doing similar work. My hope is that teachers across grade levels and geographic areas will be able to connect to the examples offered through this social justice educational framework as a affirmations of their work and/or springboards for new critical pedagogies.

By starting with the cultural resources and assets of the students, critical educators help children move from personal to social understandings. They do this in two ways. First, students learn to read their world and analyze it through a sociopolitical lens. Starting with students' prior experiences—the voices they bring to the classroom—these critical educators build a curriculum around these voices that introduces additional voices that have been omitted from the traditional canon. By critically examining these multiple voices and how they have been positioned by

society, students move from a personal to a more social and political perspective. Second, critical educators help their students develop greater self-efficacy or agency so they may act on the perspectives they gain from hearing the rich plurality of multiple voices.

These moves parallel what Freire (1970/2005; Freire & Macedo, 1987) described as reading and writing the world in order to transform it through critical praxis. Teachers engage in dialogue with their students, really getting to know them and listening to them in a humble and loving way. They learn alongside their students as they read their world from a personal and sociopolitical perspective and then start to write and rewrite it. The critical educators in this study, like other culturally responsive teachers who look for children's and families' funds of knowledge rather than deficiencies, start with the assets their kids bring and co-construct student agency from there. This cycle of listening to students' voices, inserting and listening to those voices that have been systemically marginalized or silenced by society, and co-developing students' agentic voices seems to be a necessary condition for a critical pedagogy, whether one teaches in an affluent suburban school or a low-income inner city school, and whether one works with three-year-olds or 18-year-olds.

Implications for P-12 and Teacher Education

By starting with P-12 teachers who have enacted critical pedagogies and social justice education with positive results, we may learn from their experiences in ways that support other teachers and teacher educators interested in teaching through critical praxis (see Ritchie, Cone, An, & Bullock, 2013, for an example of enacting social justice pedagogy in teacher education). As Cochran-Smith (2004), Sleeter, (2001) and others have pointed out, such backward mapping of social justice teaching is needed if we want to learn what works in producing successful critical educators. However, as Freire (1997) and Bartolomé (1994) argued, placing too much emphasis on a particular "method," independent of context, runs counter to education for social justice, as nice it would be to have an easy formula to follow. This section outlines implications of the study for teachers and teacher education candidates and attempts to demonstrate how each of the three components of social justice education, the three voices, depends on the others and cannot stand alone.

Critical Education is Both a Mirror and Window

Oftentimes, educators emphasize one voice at the expense of another. Teachers will focus on cultural relevance without engaging students in an analysis of power and privilege; or, in haste to move students along in their thinking about oppression, teachers will neglect community-building and connecting to students' lived experiences. This study shows that it is important to create a space where all three voices engage each other. Critical educators need

to base teaching on the lives of children and the resources they bring to the classroom, recognizing children's strengths and interests and establishing a sense of trust and community so that kids see school mirroring their own interests and experiences. Yet, critical educators also need to ensure that other perspectives are included in the curriculum that may not be represented by the students in the room. Many schools have adopted the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy as an end-point in itself. However, it is not enough simply to make children see themselves in what is taught, to make them feel good about themselves without understanding systems of power and domination, although such work is certainly needed. Students need a mirror, but they also need a window into other perspectives (Bishop, 1990), including perspectives not represented by the children themselves.

Some teachers may argue that their students already understand marginalized perspectives because they have experienced, for example, racism or poverty firsthand. Other teachers may argue, e.g., that the way they teach their classes of all White, native English-speaking students is already culturally relevant, and it would not make sense to add perspectives of people of color or immigrants. However, as we have seen with Lisa's experiences, having a class of children with a similar race and ethnicity, even if their social group has been subordinated by society, does not guarantee that they understand systemic histories and systems of marginalization. Even students with multiple minoritized identity categories can benefit from windows into different perspectives so that they understand intersectionality and how privilege and power operate across identities.

Taking Agency is Not Optional, Nor Should it Stand Alone

Engaging children in a sociopolitical analysis of power, oppression, and domination can lead to fatalism (Freire, 1970/2005) and a sense of hopelessness and despair (Bigelow, 2002). Critically examining the world's problems can be so overwhelming that it shuts students down, immobilizing them. Once students adopt systemic perspectives, critical educators have an ethical obligation to help them take agency and feel a sense of efficacy to address inequities. As we have explored, opportunities for agency can take many forms, including role plays, simulations, and dramatization; participatory action research inquiring into and addressing local community concerns; civic participation and civil action such as writing letters to legislators and government officials; and community exhibitions of students' self-representations, among others. Helping students find opportunities to develop agentic identities in which they see themselves as actors capable of transforming their world is a critical component of education for social justice.

However, as we have also seen, teachers may be inclined to jump straight to action without connecting the action to students' lives and to a nuanced understanding of power and privilege. Many factors collude to encourage teachers to act without sufficient reflection, e.g. vast numbers of curriculum standards teachers must "cover;" a shrunken school year that unofficially ends after the "big test" in the spring, pressure on teachers to teach quicker; a society that rewards "deliverables" and charity over critical praxis and solidarity; and hegemonic norms that discourage the exposure of unequal power relations. Taking action without reflection, as Freire (1970/2005) argued, negates true praxis; both are complementary and need to occur in tandem. While not often easy, making connections between students' worlds and the curriculum and exploring a range of perspectives on an issue before taking action are necessary steps in social justice education. Like Terry said about not wanting simply to raise pennies for pets without a deeper understanding, enacting a pedagogy that uses only one of the three voices—in this case an agentic voice—is not true social justice education.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have reported on results from an interview study with eight U.S. teachers in various parts of the country who have all been recognized for their critical pedagogical practices. I attempted to illustrate, through a backward-mapping process, how we might start with teachers who are enacting the kinds of pedagogies we find valuable, in this case teaching for social justice, learn from their teaching experiences, and use this learning to support other educators interested in education as a vehicle for social change. Using a thematic analysis with grounded theory methods, I have identified a social justice educational framework that these teachers deploy in their teaching: listening to students' voices, inserting missing voices, and co-constructing agentic voices. I have argued that while pressures exist to persuade teachers to enact single components of this framework without the others, doing so can be detrimental to students' learning and is not true social justice education. Given the growing disparities outlined in the beginning of this paper, enacting social justice education by engaging learners' worlds, bringing in the worlds of others, and (re)writing the world can work toward a vision of society that is more equitable, democratic, just, and humane.

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