

# CULTIVATING CRITICAL, SOCIOPOLITICAL AWARENESS IN URBAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: TENSIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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## Abstract:

This paper focuses on three secondary education teachers who earned licensure through a graduate-level urban teacher preparation program and then accepted positions at diverse, urban schools in the western U.S. The primary research question asks: *How do three urban secondary teachers implement the pedagogical tool of expressing and cultivating critical awareness in their classrooms?* This research responds to the calls for further inquiry into the experiences of “diversity-prepared” teachers once they become teachers of record. It provides an up-close look at what equity-oriented teaching looks like concretely in middle and high school classrooms, along with its tensions and possibilities, and addresses the potential influences of a social-justice focused teacher education program.

In United States schools, the student population grows more and more diverse each year, with large percentages of students of color, students who speak a first language other than English, and students who live in poverty (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Many teacher education programs now explicitly focus on preparing students to address this diversity in their classrooms (e.g., Darling-Hammond, French, & García-Lopez, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001) and aim to equip their graduates with pedagogical tools related to social justice and equity (McDonald, 2003, 2005). Few empirical studies exist, however, on the experiences of these “diversity-prepared” teachers once they are hired.

This paper focuses on three secondary education teachers who earned licensure through a graduate-level urban teacher preparation program (the “Urban Teacher Education Program--UTEP”)[1] and then accepted positions at diverse, urban schools in the western U.S. Mia is a White, female, monolingual social studies teacher at a large traditional middle school. Conner, prepared as an English specialist, is a White, male, monolingual teacher of multiple subjects at a non-traditional high school [2]. Kata, a Latina, female, bilingual Spanish and social studies teacher, also teaches at a non-traditional high school. The primary research question asks: *How do three urban secondary teachers implement the pedagogical tool of expressing and cultivating critical awareness in their classrooms?* This research responds to the calls for further inquiry into the experiences of “diversity-prepared” teachers once they become teachers of record. It provides an up-close look at some examples of what equity-oriented teaching looks like concretely in middle and high school classrooms, along with its tensions and possibilities, and addresses the potential influences of a social-justice focused teacher education program.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Two strands form the theoretical grounding for this paper: (1) appropriation within a sociocultural framework and (2) the literature on culturally responsive, equity-oriented teaching. These strands informed the development of particular pedagogical tools for teaching for equity and social justice which are presented at the end of this section.

Applying the central ideas of activity theory within a sociocultural framework, Grossman and colleagues (1999, 2000) developed the notion of pedagogical tools for learning to teach English/Language Arts. Pedagogical tools include the principles, frameworks, ideas, and broadly applicable theories that can serve as guidelines for instructional practice (e.g., constructivism or reader-response theory) (1999, p. 14) as well as specific classroom practices, strategies, and resources that are more immediately applicable (e.g., specific curriculum materials, or instructional strategies such as journal writing) (1999, p. 14).

Although Grossman and colleagues (1999, 2000) provide separate definitions for conceptual and practical pedagogical tools, the two types of tools are intricately linked. Most (if not all) of teachers’ practical tools are guided by their concepts and beliefs about such things as how people learn, what the roles of teachers and students should be, and so forth. Teachers apply pedagogical tools to solve various problems that arise in the context of teaching and learning (Grossman et al., 1999).

From a sociocultural perspective, learning and development occur as people engage in the process of *appropriation*. Rogoff (1995) describes appropriation as “the process by which individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation” (p. 150). She emphasizes that people change through their participation in various activities. Newman, Griffin and Cole (1989), too, emphasize that people appropriate tools “through involvement in culturally organized activities in which the tool plays a role” (p. 63).

The literature on teaching for social justice and equity and culturally responsive teaching forms another central part of the conceptual framework of the present study. Many publications describe the knowledge, dispositions and practices that scholars have found to be central in teaching for social change. This vision of teaching includes but is not limited to:

- demonstrating cultural consciousness (e.g., Davis, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2002);
- maintaining high expectations for students (e.g., Jordan Irvine & Armento, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2012);
- teaching in an interactive, community-oriented way that allows *all* students access to meaningful, rigorous, challenging curriculum and learning experiences (Gay, 2000; Jordan Irvine & Armento, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002);
- developing personal bonds with students (Brown, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Jordan Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002);
- ensuring that students are taught the skills they need but might not yet have (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Knapp et al., 1995);
- not being afraid to name and critically reflect on various types of inequities at all levels of society and schooling, in ways that make sense developmentally for students (critical, sociopolitical consciousness); selecting—and helping students learn to select—appropriate venues and opportunities for taking action to confront structural and societal inequities (e.g., Banks et al., 2005; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2001; Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005; Nieto, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002);
- explicitly bringing students’ diverse backgrounds and cultural resources into the curriculum and into one’s teaching in purposeful ways (e.g., Gay, 2000; Jordan Irvine & Armento, 2001);
- developing alternative modes of presentation and assessment to tap into students’ multiple ways of knowing and representing the world (e.g., Fadel, Honey & Pasnik, 2007)

Together, these conceptual strands informed the development of my own pedagogical tools for teaching for equity and social justice. Informed by an extensive literature review, my knowledge of the curriculum and philosophy of the Urban Teacher Education Program [UTEP], my role as a former program administrator, and the evidence from my extensive data set, I used an iterative process to develop and refine the tools as a heuristic for understanding the experiences of the teachers. An overview of the five tools is presented in Table 1. However, for the purposes of this paper, I report primarily on the teachers’ appropriation of Tool 2: Express and Cultivate Critical/Sociopolitical Awareness. This tool is particularly important for understanding the process of learning to teach for equity and social justice. Furthermore, some of the most revealing stories about the teachers’ identities, practices, and contexts emerged through analyses of this tool. For one teacher, Conner, I also report simultaneously on appropriation of Tool 3: Craft Relevance/Authenticity, because in most cases, when I observed implementation of the critical awareness tool, I also saw implementation of the relevance tool hand in hand. For the purposes of this paper, I include the detailed explanation of only these two particular pedagogical tools (see Table 2 and 3).

**Table 1: Pedagogical Tools for Teaching for Equity and Social Justice**

Name of Pedagogical Tool	Brief Description

Tool 1: Balance skills and conceptual understanding	The teacher fosters student understanding by structuring learning opportunities/tasks that reflect a balance of developing skills and developing conceptual understanding/cognitive depth.
Tool 2: Express and cultivate critical/sociopolitical awareness	The teacher demonstrates her own awareness around issues of inequity, oppression, power, and understanding multiple perspectives and/or cultivates students' awareness around these issues.
Tool 3: Craft relevance/authenticity	The teacher explicitly creates an environment of teaching and learning that is <i>relevant</i> to students' lives and the world outside of the classroom.
Tool 4: Know students as learners and work to respond to their needs	The teacher seeks to know students individually as learners and works to meet their individual learning needs.
Tool 5: Foster independence and agency	The teacher structures opportunities for students to learn to be self-motivated, self-directed, and to take responsibility for their own actions and learning.

The detailed explanation of each tool includes a list of its various facets. Each facet essentially represents a pedagogical strategy or an attitude that a teacher would display as one way of demonstrating appropriation of that particular tool.

These pedagogical tools are not divided into separate categories of practical strategies and conceptual ideas, since I maintain that practical and conceptual tools are closely linked. A teacher may demonstrate (through words, say) appropriation of a concept without being able to implement a concrete strategy linked to that concept. In contrast, it is less likely that teachers would appropriate or implement a practical tool without being aware of underlying beliefs and concepts. However, it is important to keep in mind that Grossman et al. (1999) as well as Newell et al. (2001), when investigating the use of pedagogical tools for teaching English/Language Arts, found examples of teachers applying practical strategies without understanding the conceptual underpinnings.

**Table 2: Detailed Description of Pedagogical Tool 2: Express and Cultivate Critical/Sociopolitical awareness**

<p>The teacher demonstrates her own awareness around issues of inequity, oppression, power, and understanding multiple perspectives and/or cultivates students' awareness around these issues.</p> <p>Includes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Questioning the status quo/authority of existing curriculum, policies, beliefs, assumptions, practices, etc.</li><li>2. Naming inequities and/or exploring possibilities for changing conditions that are not equitable</li><li>3. Demonstrating understanding of privilege and how various social and systemic factors advantage and disadvantage certain groups</li><li>4. Demonstrating cultural consciousness.</li><li>5. Explicitly addressing issues of race, class, gender, and other cultural categories.</li><li>6. Guiding students to reflect critically on their own beliefs, assumptions, values, and experiences and how these can influence their perceptions of self and others and their behaviors. (Relationship between experience and perception.) (Also-engaging in these practices oneself.)</li><li>7. Taking social action or teaching/providing opportunities for the students to do so.</li><li>8. Critical Literacy: Engaging in critical inquiry about language; bringing awareness to specific words or terms that have to do with various forms of power differentials and/or how words can constitute reality</li><li>9. Analyzing and considering multiple perspectives/viewpoints, and/or fostering this skill in students:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Gathering and analyzing information from a variety of sources in order to come to one's own conclusions or form one's own opinion</li><li>b. Studying the lives, histories, cultures, experiences of diverse cultural groups</li><li>c. Naming when the contributions or perspectives of certain groups are absent from the existing curriculum</li><li>d. Adapting curriculum and practices to reflect a more inclusive approach</li></ol></li></ol></li></ol>
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**Table 3: Detailed Description of Pedagogical Tool 3: Craft Relevance/Authenticity**

The teacher explicitly creates an environment of teaching and learning that is *relevant* to students' lives and the world outside of the classroom.

Includes:

1. Seeking to understand and connecting aspects of students' culture, history, interests, prior knowledge, backgrounds to the curriculum
2. Understanding how factors in students' environments influence their lives and learning
3. Using examples in class that connect to students' lives, experiences, prior knowledge
4. Crafting authenticity:
  - a. Developing tasks that have meaning or applications in the "real world" and lead to enduring understandings
  - b. Having students do the kind of work that subject matter experts or professionals out in the world (e.g., social scientists) do
5. Encouraging students to draw from their knowledge of multiple languages
6. Fostering student identity development (Who Am I?) through various classroom activities/ discussions
7. Crafting the material culture of the classroom (wall decorations, etc.) to reflect students' lives, cultures, interests in a way that does not affirm stereotypes
8. Making efforts to know and understand students' parents, families, communities

Grossman et al. (1999) identify five degrees or levels of appropriation of pedagogical tools for teaching English/language arts to describe teachers' development and learning (see pp. 16-18): (1) lack of appropriation; (2) appropriating a label; (3) appropriating surface features; (4) appropriating conceptual underpinnings; and (5) achieving mastery. They also identify two main factors that affect levels of appropriation: social context and teacher identities.

Applying Grossman et al.'s (1999) descriptions of the five different levels of appropriation of pedagogical tools initially led me to conclude that the participating teachers had all reached the "conceptual underpinnings" level of appropriation (level 4) for each of the five tools I analyzed. That is, as evidenced in interviews and observations, they understand the theories that underlie the use of a particular tool and generally are able to apply the tool in practice. However, I discovered a small amount of variation in degree of appropriation at this level. In some situations, the teachers' level of appropriation seemed to be slightly higher than level 4, even approaching mastery (level 5). However, I initially hesitated to assess any of the teachers at level 5 because Grossman et al. (1999) posit that it would be unlikely for a novice teacher to achieve mastery.

In other situations, the level of appropriation seemed to be teetering between level 4 and level 3 ("appropriating surface features"), but there was still enough evidence to judge appropriation to be at level 4, based on Grossman et al.'s (1999) definitions—just not a very strong level 4. For example, for the tool of critical awareness for one teacher, I did not find a large amount of evidence of this tool being applied in the classroom in the form of concrete strategies. However, interview transcripts and other artifacts revealed compelling evidence of the teacher's appropriation of the conceptual ideas of critical awareness.

As I looked more closely at differences in implementation across the three teachers, I was able to articulate three sub-levels of the "conceptual underpinnings" category and define more clearly the characteristics of level 5 appropriation ("achieving mastery"). Table 4 explains my elaborated, nuanced descriptions of levels 4 and 5. Analyzing the data for both quantity and quality of evidence of each facet of the pedagogical tools allowed me to determine where each teacher was situated within the elaborated descriptions of levels of appropriation.

**Table 4: Elaborated Descriptions of Levels of Appropriation: Conceptual Underpinnings (Level 4) and Mastery (Level 5)**

Level of Appropriation	Description
Level 4a	Consistent evidence of conceptual understanding + <i>a few</i> examples of practical strategies
Level 4b	Consistent evidence of conceptual understanding + <i>some</i> (but not enough to classify as consistent) evidence of practical strategies
Level 4c	Consistent evidence of conceptual understanding + <i>consistent</i> evidence of practical strategies
Level 5: Achieving mastery	Consistent evidence of conceptual understanding + <i>consistent</i> evidence of practical strategies, developed and demonstrated over time and across various contexts

## METHODOLOGY

### Data Collection and Analysis

The present study used qualitative, interpretive, case study methodology and represents a slice of a larger research project. Data sources included: (1) field notes, audio files, and videotape transcripts from 41 combined hours of observation in Mia's, Conner's, and Kata's classes over six months; (2) transcripts from 59 hours of semi-structured recorded interviews (mostly with the participants, but also with their support providers, such as school administrators and induction mentors); and (3) artifacts, such as written metaphors of urban teaching, course assignments, lesson plans, student work, and school-issued documents. The observations were organized into cycles, with one cycle representing three consecutive days of classroom visits. The cycles were spread out over a six-month period. During the data collection period, my role with the participants was as observer and listener rather than as mentor, instructor, or evaluator. Observation guidelines are included in the appendix.

I conducted several different types of interviews. The *praxis* interviews were designed to probe the participating teachers' understandings of theoretical concepts as well as their practical strategies for culturally responsive, equity- and social justice-based teaching—in other words, their conceptual and practical pedagogical tools. The purposes of the *identity* interviews were to understand the teachers' biographical background and relevant intellectual history; their decision to become urban teachers as well as the events and people in their lives that influenced that decision; their core beliefs as urban teachers; their conceptions of what it means to teach for social justice and equity; and how their sense of self as urban teachers evolved over the course of the study. The identity interviews also included discussion about and reflection on the metaphors of teaching that

each participant created at the beginning and end of the study (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001). The main purpose of the *context* interviews was to understand the teachers' perceptions of the influence of various contextual factors, with respect to their conceptions about teaching for equity (generally and in their content area), pedagogical strategies, and development of professional identity. I also conducted interviews before and after each cycle of classroom observation in order to understand the teachers' goals as related to their beliefs and conceptions about teaching for equity, and their reflections on various aspects of the lessons. Complete interview protocols and the metaphor task are available in the appendix.

Data analysis began during data collection and was iterative and recursive. The process was inspired by Spradley's domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis (1980) and LeCompte and Shensul's (1999) stages of: (1) isolating specific items and working to label them accurately; (2) looking for and articulating patterns and structures; and (3) clarifying meaning through "linking together or finding consistent relationships among patterns, components, constituents, and structures" (p. 177). The coding schemes are available in the appendix. After coding and analyzing for themes, I constructed vignettes and descriptive case stories for each teacher. Validity and trustworthiness of results were established through triangulation of data sources and analysis methods, adapting previously validated interview protocols (see Peressini, Borko, & Romagnano, 2004), member checking, and prolonged observation.

## FINDINGS

In this section, I present a case story of each of the three teachers. The case stories are designed to illustrate the teachers' appropriation and implementation of the pedagogical tool of expressing and cultivating critical/sociopolitical awareness. Each case begins with a brief overview of the teacher's relevant personal history, basic information on school context, a short glimpse into the teacher's views of culturally relevant pedagogy, and a general assessment of appropriation level for the critical awareness pedagogical tool. Then, through a series of vignettes (primarily constructed from actual classroom observations, but also from teacher self-reports about how various lessons unfolded), descriptions of classroom observations, and excerpts from interviews and artifacts, I analyze various facets of the critical awareness tool as instantiated in the thinking and practice of each teacher. These facets are indicated by subheadings. Finally, I present an analysis of factors which appear to shape each teacher's level of appropriation of the critical awareness pedagogical tool.

### MIA

Mia is a White, monolingual female in her mid-twenties who grew up in a working class community in the Southern United States, and, in her words, was "taught to be a peacemaker." After graduating from college, Mia spent a year as an Americorps volunteer in an urban middle school before enrolling in the UTEP. Mia is social studies teacher at a large, traditional, diverse, urban middle school which serves a predominantly Latino community and is "on watch," being audited by the state because of historically low test scores. The school is divided into content-specific departments, and students rotate from teacher to teacher throughout the day for various subjects. Each class period generally lasts about an hour.

This excerpt from an interview with Mia captures her own identity as an urban teacher and sets the stage for her case story:

I think people contribute in different ways. I don't know if my contribution is more on the activist end. I feel like "teaching for social justice" means that you're out there, not only in your classroom, but in your free time, that you're attending rallies, or you're keeping up on current events, which I don't necessarily always do, because I feel so weighted here a lot of times that when I leave here, I just want to not deal with that. And there are some people whom I know who—they're not like that. When they leave here, they're still ON...

Throughout the data set, Mia's developing consciousness about issues of social justice and equity comes through: in her awareness of the potential mismatch between the culture of school and the home cultures of students; in her burgeoning bravery to speak up to colleagues in the face of biased or oppressive comments, especially ones that pigeonhole students into stereotypical roles; in her concerns about the effects of negative linguistic labels placed on students and schools; in her commitment to having her students study the lives, histories, cultures and experiences of diverse cultural groups; in her critique of the absence of the perspectives and contributions of women in the mandated curriculum, and her subsequent modification of it. These situations all represent tensions or problems of practice towards which Mia applies the pedagogical tool of critical awareness. As she attempts to negotiate these tensions, she refines her identity as well.

Mia appears to have appropriated more thoroughly the conceptual rather than practical aspects of the pedagogical tool of expressing and cultivating critical/sociopolitical awareness. In other words, it is clear from what she says across data sources that she thinks about and cares about issues of equity often and in many different ways. Her conceptions, her ideas, her beliefs,

her dispositions all reflect a certain level of critical awareness. On the other hand, the data set includes fewer examples of her transforming these conceptions into practical classroom strategies that, for instance, cultivate her students' sociopolitical awareness. For these reasons, I assessed her appropriation level of the critical awareness tool as 4a (consistent evidence of conceptual understanding and a few examples of practical strategies). In the subsequent vignettes, I explore a few instances of Mia implementing the critical awareness tool with her students.

Author: Do you think your students are aware that you are trying to teach with a culturally responsive approach? Do you ever talk to them about that?

Mia: I've mentioned some things a few times. But no, I don't think that they are. I don't—I think that they are aware--they think we do a lot of projects in this class. But they have no idea why. I get a lot of "You make us write a lot." But they don't know why. I get a lot of "You don't give us a lot of homework," which I don't because we do mostly stuff in the class. They're not really aware of why.

And I don't know. I think it's kind of a delicate thing because I don't want to say to them, "I'm trying to make you equal with other people" or "I'm trying to give you the same opportunities that other people have that you don't." I don't want to say that to them. That's not very culturally responsive, because they DO have opportunities that other people don't have. They have knowledge and experience that other people don't have, and for me to say that I'm trying to give you knowledge and skills or trying to help you come up with knowledge and skills that you don't already have is insulting.

## Multiple perspectives

One facet of the critical awareness tool is to analyze and consider multiple perspectives or viewpoints, and to foster this skill in students. As an example from Mia's practice, she created a mini-unit about contemporary issues with the Brazilian rainforest as part of the Latin America unit. The culminating project was a debate in which students took on the perspective and roles of different interest groups for the rainforest and "had to argue the points from that position." The debate unfolded as such:

Settlers: We can't believe they did this to us! We can't believe that they would promise this rainforest land to us, and then decide not give it to us.

Ranchers: We are really happy with the government because they've given us all this land to put our cattle on, and they're giving it to us at reduced prices. We think that the problems with the rainforest are coming from all the other groups, except the government.

Settlers (jumping out of their seats): How can you say that they're doing great things?! They did this terrible thing to us. We had nothing and they promised it to us, and then they didn't give it to us.

Ranchers: We don't care. We're making money and they're helping us make money.

When reflecting on this activity and mini-unit, Mia marveled at how passionate the students became because issues of justice were involved. At one point in the debate, she found herself "wanting to talk because I wanted to be the one to kind of have the knowledge, I guess. But they didn't need me for that. They had it themselves and were totally into their roles." She continued,

This project, unlike any of my other projects, actually, included that piece of "Is there justice in the world?" and of "We need to take action." I mean, I had several students say, "Oh, my gosh, I can't believe that's happening. Well, what are we going to do about it?" You know? Which would be a great opportunity for me to sort of figure out, what are we going to do about it? I need to figure out a way if we could write letters to someone or something like that, you know?

I think they would respond well to that. But that's the aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy that I always struggle the most with. That civic action piece is always the part that I'm always, like, racking my brain about. I don't know how I can fit this in. I don't know how it fits.

This passage demonstrates an example of how Mia appropriated the conceptual underpinnings of the critical awareness tool without being sure of how to transform that understanding into practical classroom strategies.

## Explicitly address diverse aspects of identity

Another aspect of the critical awareness tool is to explicitly address issues of race, skin color, class, culture, gender, and so forth. Doing so is never straightforward or predictable, and the ensuing discussions are often emotional, political, and value-laden. In this next section, I describe several episodes that illustrate some of issues and tensions that can arise when introducing these important but sometimes difficult topics within classrooms.



During the Mexican history unit, for example, Mia wanted her students to understand that “many Mexicans today are a blend of Spanish and indigenous cultures” because Mexico was “basically a Spanish colony for awhile.” She had noticed that her many students of Mexican descent seemed to “have this sense of ‘We’re just Mexican and that’s what we are.’ Like they’ve always been Mexican and nothing else.” Mia wanted to clear up potential misperceptions, saying, “They need to understand that part of their culture comes from Spain, that there really is a mix of cultures in Mexico.” To help them comprehend, she asked a few of the students, “Why is your skin color brown?” When they didn’t offer much of a response, she told them, “It’s because you’re a mix of this darker Native American person and these light-skinned White people from Spain.” She continued,

And it was kind of shock to them that Spanish people are White people, too. They were like, “Really, they’re White?” Yes, they’re White. And then when Mexico originally became its own country, it was the White people, like Miguel Hidalgo who was born in Mexico, who were leading this movement. It was people of Spanish descent who no longer wanted to be a part of the Spanish crown... But, I didn’t get that across.

When I asked Mia to reflect on why she thought she didn’t make her point understood, she acknowledged that she “felt uncomfortable...even talking about skin color.” She questioned whether she should have asked the students to think about why their own skin color was brown, and she said the whole exchange “was very difficult.” I followed up on her comments and asked her to say more about her discomfort. The conversation unfolded as such:

Author: You said you feel uncomfortable talking about skin color. Is that just with your kids? Or do you feel like just in terms of the identity of who you are, that makes you feel uncomfortable?

Mia: Yeah, I think in general I think it’s something that I just am not totally comfortable with. Because like when I was growing up it was something that you don’t point out. Does that make sense? Because if you do then that makes you not accepting?

Author: Kind of like the mind set of not seeing differences? Like, “Oh, we’re all just the same?” Kind of like that?

Mia: Right. Obviously there are differences, and I think it’s okay to say that. Because I did. I did say that to my students. But it wasn’t something that I was totally comfortable with. Which is probably the biggest part of the reason why it was hard for me to teach it.

This passage illustrates one of the ways in which an aspect of Mia’s identity—how she was taught while growing up not to discuss skin color differences between people—shapes her approach to discussing this issue in the classroom. Addressing topics such as this one can be difficult and takes courage on the part of teachers, as reflected in Mia’s comments. From a critical race theory perspective, this attitude of colorblindness is one privilege of White supremacy (see, e.g., Stovall, 2006) and hegemony. Often, it does not occur to White people like Mia and her family to engage in discussions about race and ethnicity. Being a member of the dominant culture affords one privileges about whether or not one names and discusses “the pervasive, daily reality of racism in U.S. society which serves to disadvantage people of color” (Stovall, 2006, p. 244).

Mia countered the required textbook’s “men and wars” approach to Mexican history by creating a mini-unit on famous Latina women’s biographies. She deliberately told the students, “Women are such a part of our history, so I thought we should focus on some Latin American women who have contributed.” At the same time, she asked them, “What other groups have not been included in our history textbook?,” but they said they didn’t know. These moves reflect several aspects of the critical awareness tool: naming when the contributions or perspectives of certain groups are absent from the existing curriculum; and adapting curriculum to reflect a more inclusive approach. Mia’s strategy in this case also instantiates what James Banks (2002) calls the “contributions approach” to multicultural education, which “is the easiest approach for teachers to use to integrate the curriculum with ethnic content. However, it has several serious limitations” (p. 73). Three important drawbacks include (1) students end up seeing ethnic issues and events as an appendage to the main story of the development of nations and to the core curriculum; (2) important concepts and issues related to the victimization and oppression of ethnic groups and their struggles against racism and for power are glossed over; and (3) stereotypes and misconceptions about ethnic cultures often tend to be reinforced (p. 73). In spite of its limitations, the “contributions approach” represents a starting place for teachers like Mia who are grappling with the important goal of introducing multiple and alternative perspectives into the curriculum. It is important to acknowledge the dilemmas involved with trying to make changes in curriculum to reflect a more inclusive approach.

On the day of the presentations, students showed their posters about the famous woman they had researched and spoke for a few minutes on basic biographical information. A few of the comments that emerged during the presentations perhaps offered “missed opportunities” to have deeper, more meaningful dialogue about race, class, culture, language, and students’ assumptions. However, these comments also illustrate some of the very real tensions and dilemmas that can arise when attempting to introduce these topics. Examples included:

- When discussing lawyer Vilma Martinez, former president of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), Jeanine said, “She didn’t go to school anymore because of the racism.”

- Barry, another student reporting on Martinez, said she got involved with founding MALDEF “because the war of the racist people was going on.”
- Heather asked Barry about Martinez, “Wasn’t it hard for her to be a lawyer if she only spoke Spanish?”
- Chuy presented on Gabriela Mistral, Chilean poet, educator, diplomat, feminist, and Nobel Prize for Literature winner, and noted that she grew up in poverty. Karina asked Chuy, “How could she become a teacher and writer if she was poor?” Chuy replied, “They were poor, but not THAT poor.”
- When Tony presented on La Malinche, an indigenous woman who was Hernan Cortes’ mistress and who served as interpreter, advisor and intermediary during the Spanish conquest of Mexico, he did not mention anything about the controversy surrounding her—Was she a heroine or a traitor? Mia asked Tony, “Do you know how the people of Mexico today view her? Didn’t it say something about them being conflicted about her?” Tony was not able to respond to Mia’s questions, and the issue was not pursued any further.

Afterwards, Mia acknowledged feeling uncomfortable with the assumptions behind some of the students’ comments. For example, she didn’t want her students to think that “Spanish speakers can’t be lawyers” or that “People who are poor can’t be teachers or writers.” Later, she explained why she didn’t make any comments during the class: “I am still learning how to talk about things like this in a way that wouldn’t be offensive.” This situation illustrates once again some of the inherent messiness that comes with learning to teach for social justice and equity. Her reflections also suggest that she has the conceptual understanding and is still working on developing the practical strategies to apply her awareness in the classroom.

### Guide students in critical reflection

A brief episode about the dangers of stereotyping which occurred early in the Canada unit illustrates other facets of Mia’s appropriation and implementation of the critical awareness tool and points to additional kinds of tensions that surfaced as she engaged in this important work. As the following vignette reveals, when students used stereotypes to describe Canadians, Mia engaged in critical inquiry with her students about the terms, tried to help students identify which experiences led to their perceptions, and interrupted the bias by explicitly telling them it was not appropriate to use such labels, especially without any direct experience to draw from. The conversation unfolded as follows:

**S1:** A lot of the time you hear that Canadians are hicks. But why?

**M:** I don’t know why you would hear that. Anybody else?

**S2:** I heard there are rednecks there.

**M:** Who did you hear that from?

**S2:** Anyone that’s not Canadian.

**M:** Does anyone else have that perception, that idea in your head? That Canadians are rednecks?

**Ss [3]:** Yeah.

**M:** Why? Where did it come from?

**Ss:** Well, they have a flag.... People in school wear them...

**M:** Let me tell you two things from my experience. One, I’m from the Southern area of the United States, and a lot of people think that area is full of hicks and rednecks, too. But I came from there. Second, I have been to Canada twice. And both times that I went there, people were very nice to me, and I didn’t notice any stereotypes like you’re talking about.

**M:** Has anyone in here ever met someone from Canada?

**Ss:** Yes....

**M:** Allison, was that person you met a redneck?

**Allison:** No.

**M:** It’s dangerous to start talking in stereotypes like that, especially when you hear it from people who probably don’t know what they’re talking about.

**Katie:** My dad has a friend from Canada, and he talks different, so people think that maybe something’s weird about him.

**M:** Is that fair?

**Ss:** No.

This episode illustrates another common dilemma that complicates the work of teaching for social justice: How can teachers make space for the expression of multiple views, without giving the impression of condoning potentially oppressive perspectives or practices? This tension is ever-present, since it is very likely that bigoted comments and viewpoints will emerge in the course of classroom discussions on race, gender, and other similar topics. In this particular exchange, for example, Mia doesn't want the comments that stereotype Canadians to go unaddressed. So, she explicitly tells her students that stereotyping is "dangerous." Then, she asks student Katie whether it is "fair" to classify her dad's Canadian friend as "weird" because "he talks different." A question such as "Is that fair?"—to which there seems to be a "right answer"—creates certain kinds of tensions and can lead students to stop talking. That is precisely what occurred in this conversation after Mia posed that question.

## Factors that influenced appropriation

As suggested by a number of data sources, Mia's appropriation of the pedagogical tool of critical awareness seems to be shaped by the context of the Urban Teacher Education Program [UTEP] as well as by her identity. Several times, Mia explicitly credits the UTEP with helping her learn about issues of culture, identity, and language, saying that many of these issues "would never have entered her brain" without the program's coursework and experiences. However, since this research only began after Mia's participation in the UTEP, it is impossible to judge to what extent the program changed her conceptions, beliefs, and other aspects of her identity. Other aspects of Mia's identity also contribute to her level of appropriation of the critical awareness tool. She notes that she has been socialized as a "peacemaker," does not identify as a social activist, and prefers to "stay out of the politics" of schools and other institutions. The combination of these aspects of her identity plus the relative newness of the material of teaching for social justice and equity contribute to her appropriation more of conceptual rather than practical pedagogical tools for critical awareness.

## CONNER

Conner, who left the business world in his late twenties to earn licensure in secondary English and is the first in his family to attend college, is a White, male, monolingual teacher of multiple subjects at a nontraditional, small high school called "Visions West," in a district that serves predominantly Latino, low-income, underperforming students. At this school, which is based on a national whole school reform model, students spend two days per week engaging in a community internship, and three days each week participating in guided learning experiences and working on independently designed projects with the coaching of advisors, such as Conner. Teachers at Visions West have a lot of curricular freedom and supervise the same group of advisees for their four years of high school.

The following excerpts from one of Conner's written reflections and an interview with him set the stage for his case story and illustrate important aspects of his professional identity. Notice how he describes his early views of teaching in general and what it means to teach for social justice:

Embarrassingly, one of my many preconceptions about teaching [before entering UTEP], involved the notion that, as a teacher, I was the Keeper of the Knowledge, Guardian of All Things Known to be Important. My job, I thought, would be figuring ways in which to interest students in this Knowledge. The idea that I could use knowledge of my students' backgrounds to help choose curriculum and adjust my teaching would not have crossed my mind. (Excerpt from written reflection)

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My beliefs about teaching are still developing, but a lot of those came out of my UTEP classes for sure. Yeah, I mean honestly like my sense of what it means to teach for equity and social justice was basically nonexistent when I entered the program. So I mean everything that we did last year was influential in terms of thinking about it and developing it. Now I need to take that theory and those readings and all that reflection and sort of create this workable model for me in the real world and in my practice. (Interview excerpt)

All of Conner's advisory group teaching episodes that I observed during data collection included evidence of the pedagogical tools of cultivating critical awareness and making curriculum relevant. Through analyses, I discovered that almost every time that Conner's pedagogical moves reflected the critical awareness tool, they also reflected some element of the relevance tool as well. Thus, in this section, I jointly present selected descriptions and vignettes to demonstrate ways in which he applies these two central tools towards various problems of practice.

Although Conner may have expressed naïveté before participating in the UTEP about making connections between the curriculum and students' lives, and about what it means to teach for equity (as seen in the quotes above), many data sources suggest that the contexts of UTEP and Visions West as a school have had a noticeable influence on his approach to social justice-oriented teaching and have shaped his appropriation of the pedagogical tools of relevance and critical awareness. For each of these two tools, analysis revealed that Conner reached a level of appropriation of 4c (consistent evidence of both conceptual understanding and practical strategies).

Early in the study, Conner shared, "If you identify yourself as someone who is teaching for social justice or for equity, I don't think you can teach without acknowledging culture in some way along the way." He noted that he had been "really interested in and thinking a lot about what we've been talking about in UTEP about culture in the classroom and getting kids to recognize and think critically about their own cultures." Specifically, he wanted his students—many of whose relatives dropped out of high school—to think "about where they've come from and what their families are like—what their cultural assumptions are, and how that compares to their classmates and cultures around them, or out in the world that they don't necessarily know very well." This is one of the problems of practice towards which Conner applied the tool of critical awareness.

### **Guide students in critical reflection**

Guiding students to reflect critically on their own beliefs, assumptions, values, and experiences and how these can influence their perceptions of self and others and their behaviors is one facet of the critical awareness tool that Conner seems to have appropriated deeply: in all observations I conducted of his advisory class, he engaged in this practice to some extent. The following vignettes, constructed from classroom observations, illustrate his approach to raising students' awareness about the relationship between experience and perception. Common questions that he posed to his students throughout the lessons included: "How do you form your opinions?," "Where do we get our standards for talking?," and "Where do our ideas and perceptions come from?"

In the same vein, as he posed these types of questions as part of various activities, he encouraged students to consider the implications and effects of various beliefs and perceptions—on themselves and others— and to not just blindly accept them as truth. In particular, he hoped his students would learn from his lessons that "you can sort of create for yourself the life that you want—that you're not necessarily a slave to your background and where you come from. You can pick and choose the cultural components that are important to you." Furthermore, he wanted to influence students' thinking and their sense of agency in the following way:

Just because family is important to you doesn't mean that you can't go to college. It doesn't mean that you have to drop out of school and go get a job. Like there are other ways that you can support your family. I just want my kids to think about where they've come from so that they're aware of it, so it's not sort of like they're on this river and they're just floating down and there's nothing they can do about it.

These comments reflect one of the many tensions that arise as Conner introduces and wrestles with equity issues within the activity setting of his classroom and with his particular students. Here, a tension exists between wanting to respect students and their backgrounds, but also not wanting students to get stuck on a particular life path without consciously choosing it. This passage also illustrates Conner's attempt to teach students to embody a sense of their own agency and self-determination. Because of the two strong mediating factors—the freedom at Visions West to teach whatever he wants, and his own curiosity about these issues (sparked by UTEP and other life experiences)—Conner decided to "test" these ideas in his lessons. He entered the first observation cycle with a willingness to experiment a bit, to try some new strategies and activities to give him "a good sense of what works and what doesn't, and what's important and what's not" in teaching for equity. He expressed some concern, though, that the lessons might not work well because "a lot of my identity as a teacher is still based in theory, and it's not based in practice." A common question he asked himself after taking a risk to try something new was, "If I knew how to teach better, would this have worked out better?" These comments reflect one of the central tensions in Conner's practice.

### **Explore gender roles**

In the first observation cycle, Conner engaged students in a number of activities to explore gender roles and oppression in their own lives and in wider society. The episodes highlighted here occurred over several days and reflect several aspects of the pedagogical tool of critical awareness as well as that of relevance. For example, one aspect of the relevance tool is to help students make connections between their backgrounds and the content at hand. Another is to use examples in class that relate to students' lives. A third is to foster student identity development. In these episodes, Conner deliberately plants questions and comments about gender issues in students' lives to help them wrestle with the question of "Who am I in this world?" In terms of critical awareness, these episodes capture some of the ways that Conner—a White male—names inequities with his students and questions unfair practices (e.g., women being pigeonholed into certain roles and paid less because of their gender) and guides students to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions. These vignettes and descriptions also reveal an important facet of context: students' own beliefs, assumptions and biases about gender, and the ways in which Conner's students interact

with one another in the context of these various attitudes.

One day, Conner had the students read Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," which takes place in the 19th century. Connecting to the story, he asked students to speculate about typical roles for women back in the 1800's, compare those to roles that males and females close to them play today, and create and share Venn diagrams to portray whether males, females, or both take responsibility for various tasks in their families. After discussion, he asked students to reflect and respond to the following journal prompt:

We talked today about gender roles in your house, your life. What, however, do you think the roles SHOULD be? Do you agree with the gender roles in your family? Do you think they should change? Why or why not?

Building on the interaction described in the first example, Conner continued exploring gender roles with his students and raising their awareness about their perceptions. In the next class, he had students take a survey about occupations, indicating "not what you have seen, but what you think, whether or not you think men should be doing these jobs, or women." After finishing the survey, Conner led a discussion to get consensus on which jobs belonged in which categories and to explore implications. Some of the jobs that students classified in the "man's occupation" column were: construction worker, NASA technician, mechanical engineer, security guard, plumber, auto mechanic, and so on. Conner asked, "So what do you notice here? What do these all have in common?"

**Ss:** They are physical... some of them are hard to do...they are dirty...you have to be smart.

**Kami:** So what do you mean, women can't do jobs where you have to be smart? That's sexist!

Next, Conner and the group looked at the "woman's occupation" column, which included, among other jobs: flight attendant, social worker, secretary, elementary teacher, hair stylist, nurse, dental assistant, telephone operator, physical therapist, day care worker, and bank teller. Conner asked, "What do you notice about these?"

**Ss:** They are cutesy...non-physical...you interact and do social stuff.

**C:** So I want to point out a few things. According to what you're saying, social, interactive jobs tend to be done by women. And, some of you said that the men's jobs were the ones that involve the brain. Are men more qualified to do jobs that are more mentally intense?

**Female ss:** We just let people THINK we're not smart.

This vignette reveals ways in which the students appear to have internalized certain gender stereotypes in relation to occupations. Although Conner's facilitation of these activities begins to touch upon raising students' consciousness about their own gender stereotyping, it does not go as far as it could have. Perhaps this was a missed opportunity for a teachable moment about how our prior schemas lead us to categorize various career choices as gender appropriate or inappropriate (see Freedman, 1992; Oakhill, Garnham, & Reynolds, 2005).

As another strategy for fostering student awareness about gender issues and related inequities, Conner had the students read a short article called "Why Do We Still Have a Wage Gap?" and posed a question to help students connect the article to their own experiences:

**C:** In a few years, you'll all go to college, and then you'll be out in the work world...Stan, let's say you are married to a lawyer. You are making \$100,000 a year, and your wife is doing the exact same thing, and she is making \$70,000. What would you think about that? (To the females:) Girls, what if you were making \$30,000 less than your male colleagues for doing the same job?

**Stan** (and other male students): You can't change that...that's just the way it is in life.

**C:** You can't? I would push back on that...

**Female ss:** I would file a discrimination suit! ...

**Eduardo** (Latino male): Men are more important, so they should get more money...

On the heels of Eduardo's comment, Conner posed another question to the group: "Why is it fair for women to get paid less for doing the same work?"

Later, fully aware of the gender tensions that had plagued his advisory class all year, Conner asked the students to reflect on how the conversation had made them feel:

**Female ss:** We were really mad.

**Denise:** It pretty much just proved the point that all the guys in this class are sexist.

**C:** What do you mean by that? What does it mean to be sexist?

**Ss** (male and female): That men and women are treated differently....That you consider the other sex inferior...

**C** (to the females in the class): Is that the feeling that you got from some of the things the guys said? (The female students nodded their heads vigorously.)

**Stan:** I just don't think the world is sexist. Just because women get paid less doesn't mean the world is sexist.

Conner responded by pushing Stan on his reasoning and then posing a few questions to the whole class: "But if our definition of sexism is treating a gender differently, wouldn't that be sexism? ... Is there a difference between discrimination and sexism? ... Is discrimination always about race? ...What is the word we use when we are talking about discrimination about race?"

**Ss:** Racism.

**C:** So, Stan, you said you don't see sexism. But we read this article about women getting paid less for doing the exact same job as men. So, is that not sexism?

**Stan:** No, that's not sexism. That's just the way the world works...

**Melei** (Asian male): They are getting paid less for doing the same work, the same amount of work, so I don't know, maybe it IS sexism...

**Stan:** But does that really mean they are being discriminated against? ...

At the end of this interchange, Conner remarked, "I know many of you are angry about some of the comments made, but I am really proud of you for having this conversation."

This vignette illustrates some of the inherent tensions in discussing issues of equity and demonstrates how teaching for social justice is far from straightforward or predictable. These kinds of exchanges are important and yet difficult to have. In this scenario, for example, Conner inadvertently positions the girls and boys against one another, potentially leading to a loss of a sense of unity and community in the classroom. Yet, tension often exists (as it does in this vignette) between trying to open up the discussion and legitimize people and their points of view, while delegitimizing biased perspectives, without shutting people down. These are very palpable problems of practice towards which Conner applies the pedagogical tool of critical awareness, but not without some struggles and dilemmas.

As a follow up to the previous episodes, Conner engaged the students in a "Four Corners Debate" to extend the conversation about gender bias and push students to clarify their thinking and be able to name inequities. In addition to illustrating several facets of the critical awareness and relevance tools noted previously, this particular vignette shows some of the student-to-student discourse patterns that were common in Conner's advisory class, in which students took many conversational turns with infrequent teacher intervention. On the board Conner wrote, "Women have the ability to do whatever a man can do but have been oppressed by sexist rules or values." In each of the four corners of the room, he had posted one sign, indicating either strongly disagree, disagree, strongly agree, or agree. He directed students to write down their arguments in response to that statement and to stand near whichever sign most closely reflected their response. Conner then invited students from the various corners to share their points of view to spur discussion. Comments included:

**Stan** (Latino male) (representing the "strongly disagree" perspective): Women have the ability to do what they want, but they just don't do it.

**Melei** (Asian male) (also in the "strongly agree" corner): I am going to counter what you were saying, Stan, about our society not being sexist. It IS sexist! For example, this country was founded by men. Do you see a single female signature on the Declaration of Independence?

The conversation then connected back to the activity about "men's" and "women's" occupations.

**Stan:** Let's say the woman has the same attributes or skills as the woman, but it's for a construction job. If you had a chance to hire a Barbie doll versus a big ol' hulk guy, who would you choose?

**Kami:** You don't know the Barbie doll hasn't had experience... The hulk might be totally stupid or might be on drugs. And the female might have been a supervisor in her last position.

**Melei:** If they are both equally capable, they should both have the opportunity.

**Travis** (White male): I think most construction bosses are going to take a man over a woman because it's more physical. It's mostly men in construction.

**Howie** (Asian male): A woman can get almost any career that a guy can get. But in the media, most guys are portrayed as in business, and women are portrayed as like teachers or housewives.

Next, Jaden (an Asian male) and Eduardo (a Latino male), both put forth the idea that "Women just aren't trying hard enough. They can get whatever job they want if they tried harder."

"Hmm, that's an interesting perspective. Any response to that?" asked Conner, wondering if his students were aware of what is called the "bootstrap mentality" to refer to the belief that anyone—regardless of race, class, gender and societal structures that advantage some groups and disadvantage other—can get whatever they want in life if they simply pull themselves up by the bootstraps and put in enough effort.

**Melei** (Asian male): Sometimes a woman doesn't get a CHANCE to prove herself because of her gender. Sometimes she's already discriminated against to start with.

**Stan** (Latino male): Tell me this. What does an employer look for? They want whoever they hire to make them money. So they look at the person's skills. On an average basis, a male is smarter than a woman in some areas of the construction profession. In some, not all...So the woman shouldn't get the job.

**Sally** (White female): But Stan, that's like someone not hiring YOU just because you are Mexican.

After a bit more back and forth among the students about what constitutes sexism in hiring practices, Conner remarked, "Some of you made the point that there are not a lot of women in government, in positions of power and influence. Is that really just a matter of people not trying hard enough? Or is there something else going on?" Time ran out before a deep discussion on these questions could be pursued.

This vignette, like the previous one, reveals tensions and dilemmas that naturally arise when engaging in discussions of equity issues. It is frequently difficult to know how to respond when students express biased points of view. What kind of reaction will keep the conversation going without alienating or marginalizing certain participants and their views? I also wonder if Conner's final questions in the vignette conveyed the message that he had a particular response in mind. Sometimes, communicating to students that we have a "right answer" in mind has the effect of squelching conversation.

Additionally, in this episode we see Conner hinting at his own understanding of the structural inequities of racism and sexism when he asks students to consider whether some other force besides "people not trying hard enough" could influence women's career options. However, he did not take the time to explain, explore, unpack, and discuss these issues with his students more explicitly and deliberately. Perhaps this was a missed opportunity for him to engage in some consciousness raising conversations by explaining and providing more examples of how racism and sexism on a systemic, societal level serve to disadvantage women and people of color, even those who put in great effort.

## **Name and confront inequities**

The first cycle of observations focused mostly on gender issues as the context for developing students' understanding of culture (including elements of their own "personal culture") and raising their awareness about the relationship between experience and perception. A later observation cycle also incorporated gender issues but expanded the context to include prejudice, stereotypes, and bigotry based on race and ethnicity. As illustrated in the subsequent vignettes, Conner continued to push students to identify and reflect critically on their own beliefs, assumptions, values, and experiences and how these can influence their perceptions of self and others and their behaviors. This pedagogical move reflects both the critical awareness and the relevance tool, as it helps to foster student identity development while bringing awareness to beliefs that may lead to prejudicial thinking or actions. The following extended vignette reveals several other facets of the critical awareness tool in action. For example, Conner explicitly addresses the issue of bigotry and engages students in naming inequitable practices such as using biased language. He also introduces the students to one form of social action—speaking up when they encounter bigotry or prejudice. Furthermore, he tries to raise his students' critical literacy skills in terms of understanding how prejudice can be constructed through language.

The vignette also reflects several other aspects of the relevance tool, including connecting the content to the students'

experiences and using examples in class that connect to the students' lives and prior knowledge. It also provides insights into the student context in Conner's class and shows how at least some of the students feel comfortable enough within the classroom setting to share potentially controversial views. Moreover, this vignette instantiates the way in which Conner appropriates examples that students provide in class (Mercer, 1992) and spirals them into the lesson or curriculum at hand.

On the board was the following definition: "Bigot: One who is strongly partial to one's own group, religion, race, or politics and is intolerant of those who differ." Conner brainstormed with students on how the term "bigot" has meaning in their lives, how it differs from racism, and generated examples from them of times they had seen bigotry in action. From a Southern Poverty Law Center resource called *Speak Up: Responding to Everyday Bigotry*, he read aloud a few passages. Selected examples included:

"I notice that my mother uses racial information in casual stories in which race and ethnicity are not factors. For example, she'll say, 'that Mexican cashier,' or 'the black saleslady.' If the person is White, though, she never mentions it."

"The boss of a Mexican American man who works in construction told him, 'You are a good worker. You are not like the other Mexicans.' The Mexican American man responded, 'I just nodded and went back to work because I wanted to keep my job. But I wish I would have said something, to let him know that a comment like that isn't a compliment.'"

"I've been called an Oreo my whole life. People tell me I am Black on the outside, White on the inside."

After each example, Conner invited students to respond and make connections to their own experiences. Then, he gave them directions for the next part of the activity:

**C:** Okay, so maybe somebody has said something to you based on your background, the color of your skin, your gender, your religious preference, or other things like that—maybe something like, "Oh, you do that pretty well for a girl." Think about this, and then write on your index card about an experience you have had seeing or hearing bigotry in the world. Maybe it was something YOU said or something that was said TO you.

Conner read aloud from the cards, after the students had finished thinking and writing:

- "I got called a redneck."
- "My sister was told, 'White girls shouldn't be here at this kind of dance.'"
- "You must be smart because you're Asian."
- "That teacher looks queer with his collar popped up."
- "I was told I shouldn't take a weight training class because I'm a girl."
- "A clerk followed me around a store and assumed I would steal something."

**C:** So, would this make you mad? If a clerk followed you around and assumed you would steal something—because you are Latino, or young, or wear baggy clothes. Raise your hand if this would make you mad. (Several students raised their hands.)

Conner then had everyone stand up, and he explained how the "continuum activity" would work. The "ten" end of the continuum represented "I would be really mad; I would confront the person" in response to this kind of situation. The "one" end represented "I don't feel comfortable saying something when folks make comments like this." He had the students move to whatever place on the continuum line represented their potential response to such a situation, and then he asked a few students to share with the group why they had placed themselves at certain positions.

After presenting a few more scenarios for students to respond to, Conner then asked the students, "How many of you have stood up to say something about a bigoted comment?" A few students shared examples of doing so. This activity illustrates another tension in discussing equity issues. Through doing the continuum activity, I wonder if Conner conveyed the message that the "right" way to respond when faced with a bigoted comment or viewpoint is to confront the "perpetrator." Certainly that is one legitimate response, but when engaging students in conversations around issues of social justice, it is important to make space for and honor multiple perspectives.

## Critical literacy

On the heels of the continuum activity, as another way to bring student awareness to language and how it constitutes reality, Conner raised an issue with his students that had been bothering him:

**C:** I wanted to bring this up because I've heard some things in class that maybe don't bother you, but they DO bother



me. For example, kids in here say “beaner” a lot to refer to Mexican Americans and to each other. I don’t think that’s right. As another example, kids here say all the time, “This is gay; this is retarded. The copier or the printer is retarded.” Why are these examples of bigotry?

**Jaden:** How can this be bigotry if you are talking about a copier?

**Travis:** Well, if somebody heard those kinds of comments, it might hurt their feelings.

**C:** If you have a relative or friend that, say, has Down’s syndrome, wouldn’t it bother you, if you heard something being called “retarded”? What are you really saying about the thing, person, or event if you say it is “gay”?

**Stan:** You’re saying people are low down, stupid, rejects.

**C:** When kids use the words “gay” or “retarded,” is it typically meant to have a positive connotation?

After a few minutes of dialogue, Conner told the students, “Well, this is an interesting conversation, because it seems like although this kind of language bothers me, it doesn’t bother *you* that much. This *is* important to me, though, so I want us to read and talk about this article.” He passed out a text called “Six Steps to Speak Up Against Bigotry” and had students read it aloud together. The six suggested steps include: be ready, identify the behavior, appeal to principles, set limits, find an ally/ be an ally, and be vigilant. Finally, as class ended, Conner appealed to the students:

**C:** I really want you all to think about the other things people are saying, and pay attention to the language that YOU use...Think about WHY you say the things you say--because it’s easy? Is it maybe about laziness? Or maybe because you think that what you say doesn’t matter, that words just aren’t a big deal? We will talk more about this later...

Conner makes very clear in his comments what his opinion is about this issue, and his words convey that his opinion is the “right one.” This situation illustrates an ongoing tension in discussing issues of equity—how to respond to students in a way that does not silence them but also does not ignore or legitimize biased points of view.

Building off the foundation set in the previous vignette’s interaction, Conner spent the following five days or so of advisory class continuing to examine issues of prejudice, intolerance, stereotyping, and bigotry. Exploring the origins of prejudice and stereotypes—via such questions as “How do we form our opinions?” and “Where do our ideas come from?”—and making the connection between one’s experiences and perceptions served as a strong underlying focus in these lessons. Additionally, Conner continued to foster students’ critical literacy skills by bringing attention to how words constitute reality and the potentially harmful effects of language. These ideas represent aspects of the critical awareness tool. Conner also deliberately situated the activities within examples from the students’ lives, a move which reflects the core of the relevance tool.

Conner adapted ideas from the Teaching Tolerance website [4] for several of his lessons. For example, two different activities were designed to help students see the difference between forming ideas from hearsay, media portrayals, or stereotypes as opposed to from direct experience. In diverse formats, Conner asked students to generate descriptions of a variety of local as well as worldwide geographical locations. Afterwards, they pored through the descriptions together to identify items that the students could say “with 100% certainty is true about the place—is a fact, without a doubt,” compared to items that were likely based on something besides fact. The conversation uncovered many different stereotypes, especially of places which the students had never directly visited. For example, one description for an African country was that “Black people wearing cheetah pants live there.” A particular neighborhood in a nearby city was characterized as having “Black people and gangs and a lot of fried chicken joints.” Students described France as a place where “White people who don’t shave” live. After leading students to identify the differences between facts and perceptions, he pushed them once again to think about “Where do all these ideas come from?” Students acknowledged that television, movies, magazines, video games, and comments from their friends and families shaped many of their impressions.

Throughout the cycle, Conner also continued to develop students’ critical literacy skills, such as through one activity on the dangers and consequences of “words that wound” (Staples, 2007). He began by asking students to identify and share racial jokes they had heard. Then, he had students respond to the statement, “The Holocaust began when the first racial or ethnic joke was ever told,” and facilitated a discussion on the effect of jokes that rely on stereotypes. The next step was to assign certain vocabulary terms to students, and have them create definitions and identify personal or historical examples of the term. The terms included: name-calling, stereotype, prejudice, enemy-making, racism, scapegoat, official sanction, persecution, and genocide. After having students make meaning of the various terms, he called students forward one by one to form a circle, in the order that the words are listed above, so that “name-calling” was situated right next to “genocide.” One by one, the students read aloud their agreed-upon definitions. At this point, the students saw, “through the visual power of the circle, the possibility that ‘small incidents’ such as jokes and stereotypes may contribute to the development of larger, life-threatening acts of persecution and even genocide.” [5]

Conner then asked the students, “How does this all connect? Why are we having this conversation? Can you make any connections between this activity and the conversations we had earlier about joke telling?” In the flow of conversation, it came up that another student (Kara) had recently uttered, in the context of an immigration discussion, “Why don’t these stupid ass Mexicans go back to Mexico?!” Instead of jumping to criticize the remark, Conner turned to the group for commentary:

**S1:** Well, she shouldn’t have said that at all, but she could have said it in a different way.

**C:** Does one of the words we reviewed today describe what Kara was doing?

**Ss:** Name calling....stereotype....prejudice....racism...

Conner’s choice to use this Teaching Tolerance activity responds to Staples’ (2007) suggestion that “it is the responsibility of all teachers of language and literacy to defy widespread, unchecked use of language that wounds, rendering individuals, groups, and therefore, society, depreciated and filled with potentially killing rage” (p. 1). Conner said that he wanted students to become aware of the “layers of power” embedded in language and society and to wrestle with the questions of, “How does your thinking and your language affect all kinds of people?” He worried that since many of his students are of color and/or come from families that live in poverty, they would themselves be the objects of bigotry or prejudice. He wanted students to recognize when this was happening to them and to have strategies for “dealing with it.” At the same time, he wanted them to recognize “when you’re... keeping [others] down based on the words you’re using” and to be able to “stop yourself from doing that to other people.” As Staples asserts, “Teaching students concrete ways that words wound can inspire empathy and active participation in social justice work” (2007, p. 2).

At the activity’s end, Conner had students write on an index card something they were taking away from this particular series of lessons. Student comments included:

- I learned some new vocabulary words and definitions and what they really mean.
- I did not learn anything except what the words mean. And I don’t really care if a classmate says these things because they choose to.
- I learned more about ethnicity.
- I learned nothing really. I just realized how often we joke with each other about stuff and it’s racist.
- I’ll try to think about what I’m saying or thinking about people, more than I do now.

In an interview, Conner reflected on the comments the students wrote and wondered about the extent to which that activity and others would make a difference in students’ attitudes and behaviors. His comments highlight the complicated nature of assessment when teaching about issues that involve ambiguity (such as bigotry and prejudice) and which are not able to be encapsulated in multiple-choice-type answers:

I don’t know what they mean by they “learned new vocabulary.” Does that just mean that now they can recognize these words on a standardized test? Or does it mean that they internalized those words and can recognize when certain things are happening? If it’s just “I learned new words” then I don’t think that’s a really deep understanding, a solid connection. I guess one test would be to listen to their comments and see if I notice a difference. Are they making different decisions about the language they use now? Are the kids still calling the printer “gay” and “retarded” and calling each other “beaner?”

It’s hard to figure out what they learned from this, if anything...I guess I go back and forth on what is a test of learning—giving them a piece of paper and giving me responses to these questions? Or like I said, is it more about how they interact with one another?...I don’t know how to test for that kind of that level of understanding, I guess.

Conner’s remarks in this passage illustrate additional tensions that present themselves when one attempts to teach for social justice. How do we really know if our attempts at raising and discussing issues of equity are making, or will make, a difference?

## **Factors that influenced appropriation**

The combination of Conner’s learning and development in the UTEP, his own curiosity about social justice issues sparked by life experiences, the conceptions of teaching and learning embraced at Visions West, and the diversity of his students’ lives all mediated his appropriation of pedagogical tools. Earlier quotes showed that Conner credits the UTEP with raising his own awareness about issues of equity and culturally responsive pedagogy. Conner’s case story illustrates the potential of teacher education and school contexts to mediate teachers’ identity regarding issues of diversity.

The following comments illustrate the way in which many of the ideas Conner appropriated remained at the conceptual rather

than practical level, however:

In some ways when I talk about my core values and beliefs, it sometimes feels a little bit artificial, because they're beliefs that were developed in UTEP classes based on readings and then writing reflections...But I feel like I need to be a teacher for a longer period of time to really develop a true sense of what my core beliefs are. I mean in a lot of ways I feel like what I'm saying sounds good but it's all just sort of rooted in theory right now, you know? It's not necessarily rooted in my practice.

Conner acknowledged that his thinking about teaching for social justice and equity and culturally relevant teaching became more concrete as the year at Visions West unfolded. He remarked, "You sort of have this idea about what it means to teach for equity, coming from the coursework. But I think that it changes when you are in a specific community and working with a specific group of kids." This comment also speaks to the situated nature of learning—how learning and the context in which it takes place are inextricably linked.

## KATA

Kata is a Latina, mid-twenties, bilingual female who experienced the pain of racism and bigotry first-hand while growing up in the rural West. Kata worked in nonprofits and had some summer and part-time teaching experiences prior to enrolling in the UTEP. She teaches Spanish and social studies at "Summit," a small high school which embraces a national, whole school reform model and which is situated in a district that serves predominantly Latino, low-income, underperforming students. The school's philosophy includes a focus on democracy and equity. She is the only Latina, bilingual Spanish teacher at the school.

The following excerpt from an interview with Kata sets the stage for her case story. It illustrates how her own personal experiences have shaped her identity and her views of what it means to teach for social justice:

Because I've experienced social inequity myself, that gives me a strength in understanding where the kids are coming from. Because social justice has been such a big part of my life since I entered college, it's something that's on the forefront of my mind all the time. I'm thinking in that frame of mind with my students all the time. So it's kind of always there, and incorporated into my classes somehow. And I want the students to be able to see things from different perspectives. All the time, I want them to be able to hear the reality of what's going on, rather than what's sugar coated and what society will tell you through our various forms of media. And what they've been told all their lives. I always have that other perspective in mind when I'm teaching.

For the pedagogical tool of critical awareness, Kata reached the mastery level (5) of appropriation (consistent evidence of both conceptual understanding and practical strategies, developed and demonstrated over time and across various contexts). Kata's very high level of appropriation is shaped by her identity—her mindset as a social justice advocate—as seen in the above quote. Additionally, her appropriation of this tool is shaped by the context of Summit High, particularly the school's focus on equity and democracy and the curricular freedom that Kata has. Furthermore, the UTEP's explicit focus on preparing teachers for social justice also mediates Kata's appropriation of this tool. Although Kata entered the UTEP with a deep knowledge base about social justice and an already well-developed identity as one who speaks out and takes action against inequity, she remarked that "I didn't know what to do with it to reach kids." She credits her experiences in the UTEP for helping her learn how to take her existing knowledge and beliefs and transform them into "tools to be effective in getting through to the kids."

## Name and confront inequities

One aspect of cultivating critical awareness is to name inequities and explore possibilities for changing conditions that are not equitable. With the intention of helping students understand the ways that Chicanos have protested discrimination and fought for civil rights in American history, Kata showed the movie *Walkout*, timed to coincide with national rallies, boycotts, and student walkouts, protesting anti-immigration legislation and sentiment. This film depicts the events of March 1968 in L.A., where approximately 40,000 Chicano high school students walked out of their classrooms in protest of anti-immigration legislation. The students were also fighting for bilingual education, updated and accurate textbooks, curriculum that included Latin American history, the ability to speak their native Spanish language in school without being reprimanded, improved facilities, and the elimination of janitorial work as punishment. The walkouts turned into riots when overzealous police began beating and arresting the unarmed students.

After the movie, Kata facilitated a discussion based on reactions that students had noted during the film. The following slice of interaction witnessed during a classroom observation portrays students noticing and naming the inequitable practice of not letting the Chicano students speak their home language at school:

**Ss:** Hey, remember that part when they said, “If it’s not worth saying in English, it’s not worth saying at all”?

**K:** What do you guys think about that?

**Ss:** It’s biased... It sucks.

**S1:** Why did the school board and administrators not let the kids speak their language? Why was it such a problem if they spoke Spanish in school?

**S2:** Because other people didn’t understand them, so maybe they thought they’d be planning something.

**S3:** I think the Whites were afraid. It’s about fear. They were afraid of not knowing what the Latino students were saying in the classroom.

**K:** Where does this kind of fear come from? (No direct responses to this question emerged.)

Here, students wondered whether the “no Spanish” rule was precipitated by fear on the part of Whites—fear, perhaps, of no longer having English be the dominant language in the U.S. As described previously, this reaction on the part of Whites of feeling threatened by the increasing multicultural, multilingual population has been documented by scholars (see, e.g., Macedo, 2000, and Tse, 2001).

In a subsequent exchange, Kata’s students pointed out and wondered about another inequitable practice portrayed in the movie—that of White teachers and administrators physically hitting Chicano students who spoke their native Spanish at school. This segment also shows one way that Kata tried to get her students to think about the implications of various actions taken in response to inequities:

**S4:** Why did the kids let themselves get paddled for speaking Spanish in school?

**K:** That was the rule. No languages other than English were allowed.

**S5:** Kids shouldn’t have let themselves get hit. ... They should have hit them right back!

**K:** What do you think it would have accomplished if they had hit them back?

**Ss:** They would have gotten in trouble... been expelled, arrested, taken out of school.

**K:** Do you think they would have been able to get ahead if they’d left school?

**Ss:** No.

**K:** So, what WAS their solution, instead? To walk out, right. Yes, this was part of their demands—that students should be able to speak Spanish in school, without getting paddled. ...

**S6:** I think it’s dumb to walk out if you want reform.

**S7:** Walking out might prove a point and get more rights, but you still need an education. So you should come back to school.

**K:** That’s an important point. The students in L.A. walked out for a certain amount of time. But to prove that they were serious about school and learning, they came back for the last part of school...

**K:** So, what are some of the lasting effects of what they did, that you can see today?

**S8:** Spanish is actually TAUGHT in schools today.

**S9:** And kids can speak it in school without getting reprimanded.

As seen in this vignette, when Kata’s students suggested that the kids in the movie fight back physically when they were paddled by people in power, Kata helped them imagine some of the potential consequences of that kind of retaliation. Namely, that they would end up getting kicked out of school, essentially depriving themselves of an education. She also helped them make the connection between taking action against inequity and getting results.

## Emotions and resistance

Kata did not anticipate the emotional responses that the movie provoked among her students. A number of White students, for example, were crying during the movie and the discussion, ashamed and horrified about the racism and bigotry that people of their own race inflicted upon Chicanos in the movie—and in reality. Another White student, Curt, had a completely different

reaction. Curt did not do the assignments connected to the movie because, as he explained to Kata,

“Within the first 15 minutes of the film, I figured out that I didn’t like the way that it portrayed White people as jerks. So, I decided I didn’t have to deal with that and I wasn’t going to watch it. So I left.”

In follow up discussion with Kata, Curt acknowledged his perception and frustration that “Spanish is taking over” in society and that the movie made him feel uncomfortable. He traced his unease and defensiveness back to an encounter in elementary school with an African-American classmate who called him a racist. His reactions reflect Megan Boler’s (2004) remarks that “students encountering social justice curricula...may well experience a shocking cognitive dissonance: Can it be that the world is not as I was taught to perceive and believe?” (p. 118). She continues, “An angry, defensive response to social justice and analyses of power and oppression signals someone who is struggling to maintain his or her identity in what feels like a threat of annihilation” (p. 118). These kinds of student reactions to the curricula that Kata puts forth contribute to her feeling of being in a “never ending race for social justice.”

In reflecting on this incident, Kata said, “That experience really taught me a lesson in that not everyone is going to see things the way I do or be okay with the way that I teach about equity and social justice.” Even so, she is committed to practices which Boler (2004) might describe as a “pedagogy of discomfort”: engaging “students in a process of critically analyzing cherished beliefs and assumptions” (p. 120). Kata continued,

Introducing content like that of the *Walkout* movie and having students discuss it and reflect on it is just part of who I am as a teacher. And I’m not going to change my style and my thinking about what I feel kids need to know, just because things are uncomfortable. I want them to feel that discomfort because that’s how we grow. But what I do want to figure out how to do better is maintain that environment where people feel like it’s safe to feel a bit uncomfortable.

I realize that there is going to be some resistance from students. I need to figure out how to resolve that but still be who I am as a teacher, because those messages are important for me to get out there. I have to figure out how to be more savvy in my approach to teaching about these things, though, so that I make it relevant to their lives as well and I don’t shut them off. Because that’s one thing I definitely don’t want to do. I don’t want to turn any of these kids off to any of this stuff.

This passage instantiates the kinds of tensions and dilemmas involved in teaching for social justice and equity. It also illustrates how strongly Kata’s identity mediates her teaching approach in general and her appropriation of the critical awareness tool in particular.

### **Demonstrate cultural consciousness and explicitly address diverse aspects of identity**

Two other facets of the pedagogical tool of critical awareness are to demonstrate cultural consciousness and to explicitly address issues of race, skin color, class, and so on. Raising these issues is rarely straightforward or predictable, and the discussions are often emotional, political, and complicated to engage in and facilitate. The following vignette illustrates one way that Kata brings these foci into her practice. In class one day, Kata had her students listen to *¿Dónde Está Mi Raza?* [6], a bilingual pop song by Bobby Pulido y los Frijoles Románticos. To summarize part of the song, involving two Latinos, the male singer asks the female, “¿Cómo te llamas?” [7] She responds with the Americanized version of her name: Mary Rodriguez. He insists on calling her María rather than Mary, because of her skin color and last name. However, she protests, saying, “I’m NOT Mexican, I’m an American.” He then tells her, “*Tienes el nopal en la frente*” Kata explained the meaning of this comment as follows:

When people of Mexican descent say this—“You have a cactus on your forehead”—that’s saying that you are wearing your culture on your sleeve, so to speak—that you can’t avoid your Mexican roots. To him, it was really obvious that she was Mexicana and couldn’t deny that, because of how she looked and her Mexican last name. But she didn’t feel that way—she was trying to kind of Americanize herself. So what he’s trying to say is that there are a lot of people that live in the United States that are of Mexican descent but maybe don’t embrace or act proud about their culture once they get here...

The male continues to sing, with lyrics that include “Where is my race? Where are my people? They are lost because they don’t know who they are... they have forgotten their roots, their history, their traditions... I’m proud of my family and my color, and I carry the blood of my race in my heart...”

Wanting to engage her mostly Latino students in a conversation about connecting with one’s racial and cultural identity, Kata asked, “So, what do you think about the guy’s comments? ... Do you think that happens a lot, that people deny their culture or heritage?” After a period of silence, one student finally responded, “I don’t really care.”

Trying a different tack, Kata then asked, “Now, what about speaking Spanish—do you think that connecting to your native language is important, to know who you are? ... Do you think it’s important to speak the language of the country that your family is originally from?” After another long silence, a few students finally spoke.

**S1:** If you’re interested in it, then yeah.

**S2:** If you feel that your heritage is important, then it probably IS important. But if you feel like it’s not a big deal, then why spend time thinking about it?... It just depends on how you look at it. [This is a Latina student speaking here.]

**S3:** If you don’t care about your heritage, then it’s not important...

**K:** It’s not important? ... Do you see that as a luxury, to be able to decide if you care or not about your heritage?

Her final question in this exchange was intended to address issues of privilege related to one’s racial and linguistic background and skin color. After yet more silence, Kata decided to end the conversation and move on to the next part of the lesson. When discussing this episode in an interview later, Kata expressed disappointment about the students’ lackluster response to the discussion, given that so many of them are of Mexican descent. She hoped that the song and its discussion had planted a seed that might take root down the road in students’ lives. This scenario illustrates yet another example of the kinds of tensions and dilemmas involved in teaching for equity and social justice. In this particular instance, Kata’s questions seem rhetorical. Perhaps her students sensed that there was a “right opinion” to the queries about privilege, and decided to keep quiet. I wonder if Kata’s disappointment with the students’ lack of participation suggests that she had a certain outcome or resolution in mind for the discussion. As demonstrated in this example, discussing equity issues is unpredictable; it is difficult to know how students will respond. However, it is important to get students to reflect on how privilege operates and other related topics.

## Multiple perspectives

Understanding issues from multiple viewpoints and fostering this disposition in students is another facet of the critical awareness pedagogical tool which showed up in many interviews with Kata as well as in each observation cycle. In another segment of the *Walkout* movie discussion, for instance, when a student commented, “I wonder why Mexican-Americans aren’t in the history books,” Kata put the question back to the class. “Why do you think that is?” she asked. After students suggested a number of possibilities, she asked,

**K:** Who wrote the history?

**S1:** Oh! White people.

**K:** Yes, so the history was written from the perspective of the White people.

Naming when the contributions or standpoints of certain groups are absent from the existing curriculum—as Kata and her students did here with regards to Mexican-Americans—represents one form of fostering multiple perspectives. Then, to illustrate her point and help students understand why it is important to consider multiple viewpoints, Kata came up with the following kid-friendly example, connected to students’ experiences:

**K:** Let me give you an example of what I mean by perspective. Here in this classroom, everybody has a different perspective about what’s going on right now or at any time. These two students are sleeping, there are a few more having side conversations, there are some people who are very involved in the conversation. So, they all have a different perspective.

But let’s say Roberto says, “I’m going to write a story about what happened in Ms. Kata’s class on the day after the student walkouts.” So, he sits there and he writes it all. Then, ten years from now, somebody wants to know what happened in Ms. Kata’s class the day after the walkouts. Did the class talk about it? Did they not? The only documentation we have is Roberto’s perspective. So they’re going to take that to be...what?

**Ss:** The truth.

**K:** Exactly. But is Roberto’s the only perspective that there is in this classroom? ... Do you think that he included EVERY little thing that happened in the classroom?

**Ss:** No... just what HE thought was important or worth talking about.

**K:** Exactly... exactly...Would your lives and perspectives be accurately represented from every viewpoint in here?

**Ss:** No.

The last segment of this episode gives an example of how Kata encourages students to analyze information from a variety of sources in order to form one's own conclusions, another element of perspective taking:

**K:** So, it is SO important for you guys to know this and think about this. When you are reading any book, even if it's a textbook from the classroom, what should you do?..... Should you automatically take it for truth?

**Ss:** No!

**K:** What else should you do? [She waits.] You should check for bias in any way. What else should you do?

**Ss:** Check the sources?

**K:** Exactly, you should check for other sources written by as many people as you can find, that could have possibly been there at the same time. It's very important to do that, because otherwise, you're only getting one perspective.

The notion of seeking, appreciating, and valuing multiple perspectives is conceptually rich, but as shown in these segments, Kata found ways to present the idea in ways that would be understandable to her teenage students.

As noted, Kata's commitment to helping her students consider multiple perspectives was a common theme across many data sources. Another example occurred during one of her social studies lessons about the conquest of Mexico, when she was conducting a mini-lecture/ storytelling session about the roles that Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortes and Aztec princess Doña Marina (also known as Malintzin or La Malinche) played. Because Doña Marina was the interpreter between Cortes and the Aztecs, and because the Aztec capital fell to the Spaniards, some folks believed that she betrayed her people. Yet others saw her as a heroine. Kata presented both sides of the story to her students and asked them to decide and justify their thinking—"How would you see her—as a heroine or a betrayer?"

The final project for the *Conquista de México y Nueva España* mini-unit also allowed students to deepen their understanding of what it means to think about and take on multiple perspectives. Kata asked students to complete a RAFT writing assignment (Role, Audience, Format, Topic), which is a creative way for students to communicate information by taking on various points of view or perspectives, for a specific audience, on a specific topic, in a specific format. Students selected from among characters whose stories they had learned about, various written formats (letter, diary, appeal speech, or newspaper article), and specific audiences and topics related to the history they had studied. They were directed to "write from the character's perspective to describe what you've learned." Kata provided students with the following prompts to help them understand the character's viewpoint and write a successful RAFT paper:

**Personality:** Who am I? What are some aspects of my character?

**Attitude:** What are my feelings, beliefs, ideas, and worries?

**Information:** What things do I know that I should share in my writing?

**Topic Content:** What information is important to share considering the audience and my format of writing?

These prompts helped students create products in which they demonstrated their understanding of the content as well as the ability to step into the shoes of another person.

## Factors that influenced appropriation

As seen throughout this section, Kata has a well-developed "social justice meter" and a strong sense of herself as a cultural being. Kata's case story provides a powerful example of the critical role of personal history in identity formation and on appropriation of pedagogical tools. We see many indications that her life experiences with being the object of outright discrimination as well as more subtle bias have made her painfully aware of injustices and shaped the person—and teacher—she has become. Participating in the Urban Teacher Education Program, she says, taught her tools to bring her own "crusade for justice" into the classroom and help students learn about inequities and ways to fight them. Teaching in what Kata calls "a liberatory way" seems to bring at least some relief to the ongoing struggle she feels in what she perceives as a racist, bigoted society.

## CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Learning to teach for social justice and equity is an ongoing process, not typically something that can be mastered during one year of teacher preparation year or as a first-year teacher. This paper provides glimpses into the ongoing development of three secondary teachers who were prepared as culturally responsive educators in an urban-focused teacher education program. It illustrates some of the tensions and possibilities of what happens inside the classrooms of teachers who strive to teach for equity and social justice at the middle and high school levels. As described throughout the paper, the teachers all face challenges and frustrations as well as moments of hope as they attempt to cultivate and express critical/sociopolitical awareness in their classrooms.

Urban education researchers (e.g., Gay, 2000; Michie, 2005; Rose, 1995) have bemoaned the lack of published illustrations of teaching for equity and social justice in the classroom, along with its inherent dilemmas and tensions. In particular, Rose (1995) claimed that “we are in desperate need of rich, detailed images of possibility” that “take us in close to teaching and learning” (p. 4) in the classrooms of urban teachers. By illustrating the problem solving process in which Mia, Conner, and Kata engage as they manage discussions with students around topics of equity, the present study responds to the call of these scholars and potentially can help the field understand more deeply the process of learning to teach for equity/social justice.

Looking across the three cases, one of the most salient tensions and problems of practice that comes forth is how to initiate and engage in conversations about equity and social justice issues. These kinds of exchanges are important and yet difficult to have. A key dilemma is how to create space for honoring multiple perspectives, even if the views expressed do not necessarily reflect what we as educators believe. At the same time, what message gets communicated if we ignore comments that have the potential to oppress others, that are naïve, and/or that emanate from lack of experience interacting with people or perspectives that are “different” in various ways? For example, all three cases illustrate discussions in which there seemed to be a “right opinion,” an “answer” at which the teacher hoped the students would eventually arrive. Generally, in these situations, students tended to stop talking. However, getting students to reflect about issues such as how racial privilege operates is important.

There is not just one “right way” to go about having these discussions. The teachers in the present study find their own entry points for raising and discussing issues of equity and fairness, based on their own identities and what feels comfortable for them, even though they all have to get outside of their “comfort zones” at times. Dilemmas naturally arise when introducing and discussing these topics, as they are not straightforward or predictable and elicit many different opinions. The case stories provide an up-close look at some of the ways that Mia, Conner, and Kata respond to these kinds of problems of practice. One implication is that teacher education programs need to consider how to equip teacher candidates for these kinds of conversations, perhaps through reading and discussing case studies and theoretical perspectives, and engaging in role playing to consider different scenarios and to practice various responses.

Reflecting back across the experiences of Mia, Conner, and Kata, we see that they all reached fairly high levels of appropriation of the pedagogical tool of critical awareness. Recall that analyses led to the following appropriation ratings for this tool: Mia at Level 4a (consistent evidence of conceptual understanding plus a *few* examples of practical strategies), Conner at Level 4c (consistent evidence of conceptual understanding plus *consistent* evidence of practical strategies), and Kata at Level 5, Mastery (consistent evidence of conceptual understanding plus *consistent* evidence of practical strategies, developed and demonstrated over time and across various contexts). The four central factors that influenced the teachers’ levels of appropriation of the critical awareness tool were (1) the context of the Urban Teacher Education Program itself; (2) the school context; (3) the diversity of students; and (4) elements of the teacher’s identity, particularly personal biography and history.

As described in the case stories, all three teachers attributed at least some of their conceptions and practices of teaching for social justice (as instantiated here in the critical awareness pedagogical tool) to their coursework and field experiences in the Urban Teacher Education Program, a major goal of which is developing participants’ strong commitment to social justice and equity. For Mia, a self-described “peacemaker” and “non-activist-type,” the ideas and practices of multicultural, critical education were completely new prior to her participation in the UTEP. For Conner, while volunteering with a community youth group and working in the corporate world, doing what he called “making the rich people richer,” he realized that he could do more “to make the world a more just place.” So, his learning in the UTEP built upon awareness and sensibilities of justice and equity he had begun to develop prior to entering a teacher education program. For Kata, the only teacher of color among the study’s participants, and a woman who described a lifetime of experiencing discrimination and bigotry because of her skin color, social class, and language background, the UTEP provided her with concrete, specific tools and practices to bring what she calls her own “crusade for justice” into the classroom. Thus, for all three teachers, their appropriation of the critical awareness pedagogical tool was shaped to some extent by the context of the UTEP, even though their backgrounds differed significantly prior to entering teacher education.

For the three teachers, the context of their school also appears to have influenced their appropriation of the critical awareness tool, although exploring this factor in depth is beyond the scope of this particular paper. Kata and Conner both taught in small high schools whose mission included a specific focus on democracy and equity. They also both had significant curricular



freedom and were able to infuse their lessons with social justice issues quite frequently. On the other hand, Mia's large, comprehensive middle school was under tremendous pressure to raise standardized test scores quickly. Thus, she had fairly rigid curricula to follow and did not have as much freedom to integrate equity and social justice issues into the set plan. These differences in school context shaped, to some extent, the teachers' appropriation of the critical awareness tool.

All three teachers worked in schools with diverse populations of students, including many Latinos, English language learners, and students with low socioeconomic status. As illustrated in the case stories, working daily with groups of students who are not from a White, middle class, English speaking cultural background afforded Mia, Conner, and Kata many opportunities to address and discuss issues of race, class, culture, and language, because these elements are central aspects of their students' identities and lives. Thus, the diversity of students contributed to the teachers' high levels of appropriation of the critical awareness tool.

The factor which had the strongest influence on the teachers' appropriation level of the critical awareness tool is a key element of identity: personal biography and history. As portrayed in the case stories and revisited above, the teachers' life experiences prior to entering the teaching profession affected how they approached teaching for social justice and equity. Perhaps not surprisingly, for example, Mia's relative naïveté about diversity and lack of multicultural education prior to entering the UTEP appears to have influenced her relatively lower appropriation level. While she demonstrated some conceptual understanding about the various facets of the critical awareness tool, her practical strategies were quite limited. Conner's interest in and curiosity about social justice issues, developed mostly during college and while working in the corporate world, also shaped his fairly high level of appropriation of this pedagogical tool. For Kata, as a brown-skinned, Spanish speaking woman from a rural family, her entire life has been steeped in awareness of privilege and lack thereof, frequent personal experiences as the object of discrimination and prejudice, and social activism. Additionally, Kata had several years of non-certified teaching experiences with youth prior to entering the UTEP, so she was less of a novice teacher than Mia or Conner. The combination of Kata's prior teaching and her lifelong personal experiences with social injustice heavily influenced her high appropriation level of the critical awareness tool.

While all four of these factors interacted to shape the teachers' appropriation of the critical awareness tool, the identity element of personal history and biography seems to have had the strongest influence. However, the context of the Urban Teacher Education Program also contributed to their appropriation levels of this tool. As teacher educators, we cannot influence teacher candidates' personal histories *before* they enter teacher education. However, we can, indeed, provide them with experiences *during* teacher education that will make a difference in their conceptions and practices about social justice and equity. Ideas include courses that invite students to examine their own assumptions, biases, and preconceptions, to study critical perspectives, and to learn to interrupt oppression; field placements in diverse schools and classrooms, where teachers are encouraged to engage in discussions and activities designed to raise students' own critical consciousness; coaching from critically aware mentors; and community-based service learning and field experiences.

To understand more about the developmental process of appropriation of pedagogical tools for equity, more research is needed about the specific opportunities to learn conceptual and practical tools for social justice teaching within the context of the UTEP—as well as other equity-oriented teacher education programs. Building on McDonald's (2003) study, one might ask: What practices in pre-service teacher education programs lead to opportunities to appropriate which pedagogical tools for equity? This kind of research would also shed light on specifically how teacher education programs prepare teachers for success in diverse settings.

The present study contributes portraits of practice that classroom teachers as well as teacher educators may find useful in their own development as culturally responsive, equity-focused practitioners. It provides examples of concrete strategies that others may find useful, and it illustrates how social justice teaching is constructed through the language we use. It also extends the prior work of other scholars on pedagogical tools and levels of appropriation. Finally, it demonstrates how teacher education for diversity and social justice has the potential to shape the conceptions and practices of teachers in such a way that they can continue the ongoing, important work of closing the achievement gap.

## ENDNOTES

[1] The "UTEP" is a field-based, graduate teacher licensure program that aims to prepare, support, and retain educators for high priority schools in urban areas. Participants spend the first year engaging in a classroom teaching internship under the guidance

of a mentor whose classroom they share and taking teacher education courses. During the second year, participants serve as teachers of record and complete coursework to earn a master's degree from the partner university in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in urban education. One of the program's major goals is to develop in its participants both awareness of and strategies for ensuring equitable educational experiences for *all* students. I held a leadership role in the program in its early years.

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

[3] Ss = Students

[4] See [www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org) for specific resources.

[5] From Teaching Tolerance website, [www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org).

[6] Where is My Race?

[7] What's your name?

## APPENDIX

Please see the attached document below.

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