Althier M. Lazar · Leslie M. Reich *Editors*

New Teachers in Urban Schools: Journeys Toward Social Equity Teaching

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For the teachers profiled in this book,
whose investments in learning about
themselves, their students, and their
practices will be an inspiration for others.

—Althier M. Lazar

For my students, whose lives I share
for a short time, but whose impact
on me is everlasting.

—Leslie M. Reich

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A Cause Beyond Ourselves

Althier M. Lazar

Abstract The chapter introduces five early career teachers whose backgrounds and educational experiences draw them to teach in some of the most underserved urban communities in the United States. Among the many challenges of urban education are high rates of attrition among new teachers that limit students' access to high-quality teaching. This precipitates a need to understand the views and experiences of our most promising new teachers who are oriented toward social equity. Their narratives, which appear in subsequent chapters, reveal their beliefs about teaching, their instructional practices, and their efforts to develop their students' literacy capacities. Research on cultural responsiveness, social justice, and critical caring can inform an agenda for preparing and supporting early career teachers in urban and under-resourced schools. The chapter addresses these perspectives and provides research that shows how teachers acquire them over time and across activity settings. It also addresses the significance of teacher narrative as a form of inquiry, how teachers were selected for this project, and how their narrative writing evolved.

Keywords Early career teachers · Social equity perspectives · Underserved communities · Narratives

1 Introduction

> What if the cure to cancer is trapped inside the brain of someone who can't afford a good education?—Leslie Reich

Leslie Reich, a public school teacher in South Central Los Angeles, reflected on America's educational inequities that disproportionately affected students of color and those from low-income families. But what could she do? She looked in the

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mirror and asked, How can I, a white, twenty-something, suburban-raised teacher help my students succeed in school when I understand so little about where they come from and what they need? Can sheer determination help me be the kind of teacher who will make a difference in my students' lives? What would that difference even look like?

Leslie and the other teachers profiled in this book wrestled with questions like these every day as they taught in the most underserved communities in the United States. These moments of self-doubt surfaced as they entered the steepest learning curves of their professional lives. What made matters more challenging was that they faced a range of obstacles that are virtually nonexistent in schools that serve more affluent students. This book attempts to capture the experiences of five early-career teachers who describe their backgrounds, beliefs, and literacy teaching practices. Through these accounts we can examine some of the factors that shaped their attitudes toward urban teaching and their different ways of teaching for social equity.

The experiences and enactments of early career teachers and the factors that shape them are important areas of inquiry for teachers and teacher candidates, school leaders, and teacher educators. Teacher candidates and early teachers need many more models of how others in similar circumstances learn to teach in underserved schools. Their narratives are important for raising teacher mentors' and school leaders' understandings of what they can do to support and retain early career teachers. These stories are also vital to teacher educators who are building programs that can better prepare teachers for all students, and particularly for those in economically disadvantaged communities.

This chapter provides the context for these narratives. First, I present the problem of teacher attrition in underserved communities. I share research on successful teachers in urban underserved communities and the key perspectives that guide their teaching. The perspectives include culturally responsive/sustaining teaching, critical pedagogy, social equity literacy teaching, and critical caring. This is followed by a discussion of studies of teacher development. Finally, I discuss teacher narratives as tools for inquiry and how these narratives were constructed.

2 A Need to Focus on Early Career Teachers

Educational inequality will persist unless fundamental changes in society take place, including a major redirection of resources to underserved schools and communities and dismantling inequitable structures and institutions (Anyon 2005). Teaching quality is an inequitably distributed resource when students in underserved communities often lack access to experienced, well-qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond 2010). While this is a factor of inequitable funding for education, it is also an issue of producing and supporting committed, equity-oriented teachers when they begin their careers in these communities. Understanding these

teachers and the contexts that shape their work is central to addressing the high levels of teacher attrition in high-poverty communities.

Teacher attrition in the most underserved schools is a problem of social equity because it systematically limits students from access to experienced teachers (Zeichner 2009). According to the National Commission for Teaching and America's Future (2002), 50 % of urban teachers leave the profession within the first five years of their career, with three years being the average time they remain in their jobs (Ingersoll 2003). They leave these positions for a variety of reasons, including inadequate pay, discipline problems, a perceived lack support from administrators, limitations on their decision-making, and not being fully prepared for the demands of teaching in these communities (Ingersoll 2004; McKinney et al. 2008). High teacher-attrition rates translate to an ongoing cycle of inexperienced teachers in schools that serve high concentrations of students in culturally and linguistically nondominant communities. These factors exacerbate achievement differences between these students and their more fortunate suburban counterparts, who tend to have more educated and experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond 2010).

We can no longer tolerate such inequity. This is why we need to better understand how teachers grow to be devoted to low-income, urban communities, how they confront the many challenges they face each day, how they continue to be invested in this work, and the factors that sustain or constrain their teaching and advocacy efforts. This information is needed so that teacher mentors, teacher educators, and school leaders can develop structures that support new teachers.

The problem, however, is that much of the available research on teacher quality focuses on teacher attributes and not on a wider ecology that considers teacher growth and activity within specific contexts. This is why the professional field needs more descriptions of successful teacher action within complex and unique local settings. These settings are often contested spaces where teachers make decisions in relation to a variety of stakeholders—students, parents, colleagues, administrators, and policy makers (Engeström 2011). To capture this complexity, let me begin with a discussion of the contexts that shape literacy learning and teaching.

3 Contexts and Structures that Shape Literacy Teaching

While parents play the most significant role in children's development and learning, teachers play a key role in school learning (Wright et al. 1997). Their work is shaped by a constellation of social and political factors that directly and indirectly impact their work and, consequently, students' academic development. Among factors affecting education, poverty is the principle one undermining school achievement.

Decades of research based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) affirms that students from more affluent communities produce higher achievement scores than do students from low income backgrounds (Ravitch 2013). Children and families in high poverty areas are affected by multiple stressors that constrain learning and access to educational opportunities. These include reduced

access to prenatal and health care, quality housing, safe neighborhoods, and high quality schools with fully accredited and experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond 2010). Students in high-poverty communities often attend schools that are under-resourced, under-staffed, and offer limited curricular options (Kozol 2005). Since schools in high poverty communities disproportionately serve large numbers of students of color, race conflates with poverty to contribute to an opportunity and access gap for millions of students (Carter and Weiner 2013; Ladson-Billings 2009).

Poverty plays a central role in literacy development (Allington 2001). Research finds that children raised in high-poverty communities are generally not as exposed to school-valued ways of using language and texts as are those from higher income communities (Heath 1983). A recent study indicates that by 18 months of age children from more affluent homes could identify pictures of words they knew (e.g. "ball" and "dog") much faster than children from low-income families (Fernald et al. 2013). Researchers attributed this difference to professional parents' tendency to engage their children in conversations much more frequently than do caregivers in low-income communities. The central point is that ongoing exposure to school-valued vocabulary lays the foundation to understand, interpret, and produce texts—*the essential literacy skills needed for school success*. While this research offers a window into class-based factors that can shape children's ability to meet school literacy expectations, it reflects a limited view of literacy and one that privileges the discourse practices of the culturally dominant. Professional parents' talk becomes the yardstick by which all caregivers are judged. The reality is that families across social communities use print and language in a variety of ways, although these ways may not be acknowledged in school.

The problem is that research about family language and literacy practices often reduces to a "culture of poverty" premise (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) that focuses on the inability of some caregivers to indoctrinate their children in the types of language and literacy experiences needed for school success. Language and literacy standards for schools are molded around middle-class norms. Blaming children and caregivers for their inability to live in ways that align with these norms sidesteps the responsibility of schools to raise students' literacy abilities to meet school targets and to validate the literacies and languages that students bring to school from their homes and communities. Another issue is that research that targets caregiver behavior is often generalized to all families within particular economic and cultural contexts. Children's exposure to school-valued languages and literacies varies considerably in high-poverty communities (Purcell-Gates 1996). And while children in these communities may lack the economic capital that is often used to promote literacy development (books, travel, camps, enrichment activities), other forms of cultural capital within the family and community may be available to children, but they often go unrecognized in school (Compton-Lilly 2007; Yosso 2005).

Then there are factors shaping education, including the political forces that impact teachers' and students' experiences in schools. Over the last thirty years, the goal of education has shifted from educating students for their roles as citizens for the common good to preparing them for a global and competitive marketplace

(Hursh 2007). Two major federal responses have emerged in tandem with this political shift. The No Child Left Behind Act signed by George W. Bush and the more recent Race to the Top (RTT) grants program launched under President Obama were intended to address the problem of preparing all students for a competitive global marketplace by promoting accountability, standardized testing, competition, and school choice. The Department of Education granted states waivers from having to comply with NCLB as long as they designed their own accountability and improvement plans for schools that focused on preparing students for careers or college.

Most states applied for and received waivers, but designing alternative accountability plans and satisfying the criteria for RTT incentivizes districts to continue to use standardized tests to measure student performance. A focus on standardized testing tends to narrow the curriculum to those subjects that are being tested (Ravitch 2013; Wright 2002). In addition, many teachers have also been required to follow scripted curricula, based on the assumption that controlling teacher practice will better ensure student performance outcomes. Among the accountability components sought by the Obama administration is the evaluation of teachers based on student test scores. While the idea of linking student test data to teacher performance is being contested in many states, its adoption may further promote the narrow practice of preparing students to perform well on tests.

Within this complex ecology, many teachers try to make a difference. They believe that their efforts can mitigate the effects of poverty, racism, and misguided educational policies. What they do in classrooms, how they view students, and how they advocate for them can contribute to their students' academic success. Teachers who understand and enact principles of cultural responsiveness, social justice, and critical caring are best positioned to make a difference.

4 Teachers for Social Equity

4.1 Star Teachers

Martin Haberman's (1995, 2005) research yielded findings on the personal and professional traits associated with high-performing teachers in urban schools. His work was based on his extensive experiences interviewing and observing teachers in urban schools and distinguishing highly successful "star teachers" from those who are unsuccessful (whom Haberman calls "quitters/failures"). Star teachers tended to prioritize student learning, link theory and practice, relate well to students, deal effectively within a large bureaucratic system, accept responsibility for their personal errors, and have good organizational abilities (for a complete listing, see Haberman 2005). Resilience also surfaced as a key trait as these teachers were able to endure the challenges of underserved schools far more than the "quitters/failures." Additional research reveals urban teachers' high commitments to

students based on their (1) desire to contribute to society, (2) interest in working with culturally diverse students, (3) perception that teachers need to serve students in high-poverty communities, and (4) positive views of their own teaching effectiveness (McKinney et al. 2008).

These orientations toward teaching are often referred to as *dispositions*. As expressed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), dispositions refer to teachers' habits of professional action and the moral commitments that drive these actions (Murrell et al. 2010). According to McDairmid and Clevenger-Bright (2008), highly successful teachers in urban and underserved schools have acquired the beliefs, attitudes, values, and commitments that support the democratic agenda of equitable access to school-valued literacies for every student. The goal of providing all students with equitable access to education fits with several culturally responsive and social equity orientations toward teaching.

4.2 Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Teaching

Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2009) study of eight successful teachers of African American students is an important contribution to the concept of culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings examined teachers' instructional practices, social relations with students and others beyond the classroom, and views on teaching and learning. Her study made transparent these teachers' limitless expectations of students, their unrelenting focus on helping students become academically successful, their use of cultural referents to empower students academically, emotionally, socially, culturally, and politically, and their strong links with families and the community. Ladson-Billings found that the teachers invested in their students' communities, committed themselves to giving back to the communities, and encouraged students to do the same. These teachers served as models for active community participation and service. Based on these attributes, Ladson-Billings (1995) expressed the need for teachers to develop students' critical consciousness as part of culturally relevant teaching.

> Beyond those individual characteristics of academic achievement and cultural competence, students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities. If school is about preparing students for active citizenship, what better citizenship tool than the ability to critically analyze the society? (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162)

Ladson-Billings' work was a major contribution to the concept of *culturally responsive teaching*. Her work and that of other researchers (Au 1980; Gay 2000; Lee 1995) reinforced the idea that understanding and drawing from students' culture to inform teaching is an important pedagogical tool, especially among those whose culture is not well represented in acts of teaching or the curriculum.

Culturally relevant teaching focuses on students' (1) academic excellence, (2) cultural competence, and (3) ability to challenge the social inequities that schools and other institutions perpetuate (Ladson-Billings 1995). Recently, questions have surfaced about whether the terms culturally *relevant* or culturally *responsive* go far enough in maintaining the diversity of knowledge traditions that students bring to school. According to Django Paris (2012), "It is quite possible to be relevant to something or responsive to it without ensuring its continuing presence in a student's *repertoires of practice"* (Guitierrez and Rogoff 2003, p. 95). Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a term that more accurately captures the original intent of the previous research on culturally-based instruction, and it offers a much more explicit vision for teaching. As Paris states:

> Culturally sustaining pedagogy, then, has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers. That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling (p. 95).

Culturally sustaining teaching is dependent on understanding students' knowledge traditions, including their day-to-day experiences, heritage, discourse patterns, and popular culture. Intentional, systematic study of students' knowledge traditions has been well documented in research on *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al. 1992), an ethnographic research project done by teachers and university researchers in the homes and communities of Mexican American and Mexicana/o students in Tucson, Arizona. Researchers defined funds of knowledge as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household functioning and well-being." (p. 133). Not only can these understandings and skills be recognized and validated in the classroom, but teachers can draw from them to inform their instruction. For example, González et al. (2005) describe a teacher who learned from families that many of the children in her class sold candy. She then created a literacy-based "candy-making and selling" unit that addressed school standards in the areas of mathematics, health, science, and consumer economics. Drawing from students' funds of knowledge is important for empowering students and helping them identify with school.

Closely related to the funds of knowledge concept is the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso 2005). This model uncovers the varieties of capital contained in underserved communities that often go unrecognized by educators. These include aspirational, familial, social, navigational, linguistic, and oppositional capital. Aspirational capital, for instance, refers to community members' capacity to maintain their hopes and dreams in the face of economic hardships. Navigational capital is the ability of community residents to maneuver through social systems that were established by the dominant mainstream culture. Social capital includes the networks of people in churches, business, and community organizations that can provide young people with the affirmation, guidance, leadership skills, opportunities that are needed for success. Compton-Lilly (2007) found various forms of capital among two Puerto Rican families, including social networks and other resources. Although such resources served to nurture students' literacy

development, teachers rarely acknowledge these varied forms of capital, often preventing them from recognizing students' literacy capacities.

4.3 Critical Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings' notion of critical consciousness grows out of an earlier movement in critical pedagogy led by Brazilian educator-activist Paulo Freire. Freire (1970) envisioned a pedagogy that raises students' consciousness about unequal power relations in society and their roles in addressing them. Through problem-posing education, students are invited to explore the causes of different problems in their lives. This, in turn, prompts students to inquire about why and how different structures and policies have evolved to privilege some people and oppress others.

Translated into literacy instruction, teachers with a critical orientation invite students to examine different kinds of texts (books, articles, films, social media, etc.) for messages about what is said and unsaid about social inequality and power relationships (Behrman 2006). Teachers who stress critical literacy ask students to investigate whose voices are represented and whose are excluded in a given text (including books, media, art, and other multimodal forms of literacy). The idea is to help students become informed about social inequalities so they may ultimately engage in social action campaigns to address these problems. This constitutes transformative practice because it intentionally seeks to have students identify and question social issues from various ethnic perspectives (Banks 1999). Transformative or critical teaching is distinguished from a superficial "Heroes and Holidays" orientation toward curriculum design that honors leaders and recognizes various cultural celebrations but does not seek to challenge assumptions about people or change the social order.

It is important to point out that critical pedagogy is not just for older students. In her book *Black Ants and Buddhists* (2006), teacher Mary Cowhey shows readers how she engages her first- and second-grade students in critical analyses of history through the use of several picture books.

4.4 Social Justice Teaching and Identity Development

Those who teach from a social justice orientation not only focus on the instructional needs of students and the sociopolitical contexts that shape them but also on their roles as teacher advocates and activists. Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2010) defines social justice teaching as:

1. promoting equity in learning opportunities and outcomes for all students, who are regarded as future autonomous participants in a democratic society, and

simultaneously challenging classroom (and societal) practices, policies, labels, and assumptions that reinforce inequities;
2. recognizing and respecting all social/racial/cultural groups by actively working against the assumptions and arrangements of schooling (and society) that reinforce inequities, disrespect, and oppression of these groups and actively working for effective use in classrooms and schools of the knowledge traditions and ways of knowing of marginalized groups;
3. acknowledging directly the tensions and contradictions that emerge from competing ideas about the nature of justice and managing these in knowingly imperfect, but concrete, ways (pp. 453–454).

An activist orientation requires that teachers be vigilant in identifying instances of inequality in schools and taking action. Action can take public forms, such as attending school board meetings or leading a teachers' union. One public example of advocacy is the groundswell of resistance to standardized testing led by educators in New York (Harris 2015). Activism can also take place in the classroom by changing teaching practices to allow for greater student equity. For example, observations about student disengagement during a lesson would alert the activist teacher that students are not identifying with or understanding the subject matter. This would prompt the teacher to seeking ways to change the practice and to study whether the change translates to improved student engagement and learning for everyone.

Social equity teaching relies on teachers to be reflective about their practices, to recall and scrutinize them in relation to students' needs and make necessary adjustments to improve students' learning (Schön 1983). It is not only dependent on teacher reflection but also on sustained study of one's practices. Practitioner inquiry positions teachers (and other educational stakeholders) as researchers, decision-makers, and change agents (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). By engaging in systematic data collection, analysis, and theorizing about one's professional practices, teachers are better positioned to defend their decisions about what and how to teach, and they are more able to negotiate the curriculum around what works best for their students. This is especially important in the current educational climate, where teacher knowledge about what works with particular students in particular local settings is often usurped by standardized curricula and teaching approaches.

One set of beliefs linked to teachers' advocacy efforts is an awareness of one's own social positioning in relation to students and their families. Teachers who can acknowledge their own economic and racial privileges are positioned to see and respond to instances of injustice (Howard 2006). Research on racial identity development describes increasing awareness of and response to racism for White (Helms 1990) and African American teachers (Cross 1991). White teachers' initial awareness of structural racism often produces guilty feelings that may channel into blaming those who are targets of racism. Whites who have resolved these issues through study and reflection over time may evolve to becoming self-reflective and frequently interrogating their assumptions about whiteness and what is "normal."

Such reflection is necessary to developing a positive racial identity (Howard 2006). For teachers of color, identity development also involves a search for a positive racial identity. Learning about and experiencing racism often produces seclusion from Whites; often they seek peers to whom they can relate and with whom they can preserve their sense of Blackness through adopting shared speech, dress, interests, and values. Interactions with role models whose racial identities are more evolved can lead to a more positive racial identity that eventually leads to cross-racial friendships with Whites. Uncontrolled feelings of rage over racial oppression are replaced by feelings of self-love, pride, a sense of Black communalism, and, eventually, activism. What is significant in this research is the positive relationship between racial identity development and teacher activism.

4.5 Caring with Political Clarity

Social equity teaching is fundamentally tied into how teachers care about students. Caring has been described in different ways, from caring *about* students which translates to focusing primarily on students' academic achievement (aesthetic caring), to caring *for* students, which focuses on building relationships with students and considering their personal lives in teaching (authentic caring) (Noddings 2005). Then there is care that is based on understanding the ways that students' race and ethnicity have shaped the sociocultural and political conditions of their lives and particularly their educational opportunities (Rolon-Dow 2005). Teachers who understand and use this sociopolitical knowledge to maximize students' learning "care with political clarity" (Valenzuela 1999). Caring with political clarity is consistent with the notion that teachers who are successful in urban and underserved communities tend to be both individually and structurally oriented (Chubbuck 2010; Whipp 2013). That is, they not only understand individual students and the appropriate pedagogical supports to advance learning, but they also acknowledge their students' membership in various culturally nondominant communities and the socio-political inequalities attached to these memberships. The addition of the structural component allows teachers to broaden their repertoire of supports to advance student development.

Culturally responsive/sustaining and social equity teaching orientations are based on teachers bringing all three orientations to their practices. Related research on successful teachers of African American students resulted in the identification of teachers as *warm demanders* (Irvine and Fraser 1998; Kleinfeld 1975). Warm demanders combine high academic and behavioral expectations for their students (Bondy et al. 2013). Like the teachers in Ladson-Billings' study, warm demanders take responsibility for students' learning, and they pursue it with a sense of urgency because they understand that stakes are high for many children of color.

Caring with political clarity means engaging in the practices that have been discussed throughout this section. These include learning about the sociocultural contexts that impact students, enacting empowering culturally responsive/sustaining

practices that draw from students' knowledge traditions, linking with students' caregivers, advocating for students, and challenging practices and/or policies that undermine their learning. In literacy, it also means recognizing and validating the languages/literacies that students bring to school and balancing the teaching of skills with meaningful literate engagements.

4.6 Social Equity Literacy Teaching

Research has also uncovered some of the attributes of teachers in high-poverty communities who have been successful in helping students develop in literacy. These teachers employ (1) small-group instruction, (2) independent reading, (3) continual monitoring of students' on-task behavior, (4) strong caregiver communication, (5) balancing phonics/high-order comprehension emphasis, and (6) writing responses to reading (Taylor et al. 2000). Establishing strong communication with caregivers has been addressed as a key element of culturally responsive/sustaining practice. It is important to clarify how these literacy teaching practices fall within the frameworks of culturally responsive/sustaining, critical literacy, and social justice teaching. Social equity literacy teaching (Lazar et al. 2012) attends to these constructs within the context of literacy teaching in order to advance the literate capacities of all students, particularly those in underserved, high-poverty communities.

An important element of social equity literacy teaching is acknowledging and valuing the diversity of literacy and language practices that students bring to school (Au 1980; Heath 1983; Street 1995). Teachers operating from a social equity orientation understand the power that different languages and literacies hold in different contexts, and they also understand that the literacies/languages of non-dominant groups may or may not align with those of the mainstream but are just as legitimate and serve particular purposes. Working from this perspective, teachers honor the language that their students bring to school, and they also teach them standardized ways of using English and the importance of using this language form in particular contexts (Charity-Hudley and Mallinson 2010; Delpit and Dowdy 2002).

Research with African American children (Strickland 2001), children in economically stressed communities (D'Angiulli et al. 2004) and emergent bilingual students (Lesaux and Siegel 2003) supports a balanced approach to literacy instruction that focuses on explicit teaching of skills and providing holistic meaning-driven engagements with print. A focus on skills would include demonstrating metacognitive strategies to improve comprehension, investigating particular orthographic patterns to advance spelling development, or role-playing particular vocabulary words. The point is to explicitly teach school-valued literacies and skills that students may not bring with them from their homes so they can gain access to the "culture of power" (Delpit 1995). In a balanced literacy program, teachers also include purposeful, meaningful literacy experiences such as independent reading,

engaging in book discussions, writing in response to texts, and writing for a range of authentic purposes.

Culturally responsive/sustaining teaching, critical pedagogy, social justice teaching, social equity literacy teaching, and critical caring are overlapping perspectives that are all focused on creating better equitable outcomes for all students, and particularly those in culturally nondominant, underserved communities. For the purpose of this book, we will use the term "social equity teachers" to describe the understandings and actions based on this collective research. While so much is known about the knowledge and practices related to social equity teaching, very few studies have looked at the development of early-career teachers toward these orientations, particularly in the area of literacy. I will share this research in the next section.

5 Early Career Development

A few studies address the development of social equity literacy teachers (Jones and Enriquez 2009; Lazar 2013; Mosley 2010; Whipp 2014). This research is primarily based on qualitative and case-study research that addresses the development of teachers in relation to various activity settings, including universities, classrooms, and professional-development settings.

Cultural-historical activity theory and the notion of expansive learning (Gutiérrez and Larson 2007) are useful ideas for discussing the development of early-career teachers. Expansive learning considers both vertical development, from immature to more sophisticated understandings, as well as horizontal development that occurs across difference activity settings (Engeström 1996). Each activity setting offers unique and sometimes contradictory opportunities for growth. The different background experiences, orientations, and identities that teachers bring to these activity settings can determine how they develop within and across activity settings.

Research also finds that uncomfortable experiences within activity settings play a powerful role in helping participants construct knowledge about racism, oppression, and social injustice, inciting them to take action to solve these problems (Boler and Zembylas 2003). These experiences include reflecting on one's own cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions and the ways in which they shape our actions and interactions with people from cultures other than our own (Trilokekar and Kukar 2011). Embedding a variety of discomforting and reflective experiences in a teacher education program helped teacher candidates recognize emergent bilinguals' linguistic capacities (Sharma and Lazar 2014) and develop more sophisticated understandings of meritocracy in school achievement (Lazar and Sharma in press). These studies indicate that varieties of discomforting experiences within activity settings can precipitate teacher growth if there are enough supports available to help teachers work through the moments of second-guessing and self-doubt that frequently accompany learning.

Jones and Enriquez (2009) followed two teachers (Rebekkah and Brooke) from their participation in the same graduate program that emphasized critical pedagogy into the first few years of teaching. They drew from Bourdieu's theory of reflexive sociology to consider how habitus, field, and capital might explain these teachers' divergent developmental paths across the four-year period. Habitus refers to the dispositions and actions that teachers constructed based on their background experiences and interactions in different sociopolitical settings (fields). Capital includes the economic, social, cultural, or symbolic assets that teachers brought to their classrooms. While in the program Rebekkah seemed likely to bring critical pedagogy to her teaching practices, based on her extensive travel and urban teaching experiences and the socially conscious perspectives she shared in class, yet she did not enact critical practices in her own classroom. Instead, she focused on balanced literacy teaching, an instructional approach that was heavily emphasized in her school (field). Within a short time Rebekkah identified as a teacher leader in this domain.

Brooke, who grew up in a small, primarily White, politically conservative working class community and attended a small homogeneous Christian college, stressed critical pedagogy in her classroom. She became absorbed in learning about issues of social justice, racial inequality, and was especially intrigued by critical literacy perspectives. This result indicated the powerful influence of the graduate program on Brooke's practices. The researchers posited that Brooke may have identified with social inequality because of her outsider status while in graduate school. This research indicates that teachers' background experiences, different kinds of capital (social, cultural, symbolic, institutional), and sociopolitical settings shape one's ability to teach critically (Jones and Enriquez 2009) and that each person's developmental path is distinct.

Mosley (2010) looked at one preservice teacher (Kelly) over an extended period of time to examine the relationship between her identity as an anti-racist teacher and her use of literature as a tool for anti-racist teaching. Mosley found that Kelly was aware of the need to engage her students in critical discussions about racism, but she nonetheless missed opportunities to do so. Kelly struggled when she reflected on the way she facilitated a book discussion and identified her actions as "passive anti-racist," a state she found to be illogical because she understood anti-racism as activity, not passivity. Mosley argued that development toward this goal requires more explicit guidance: "We cannot expect that reading about pedagogy or choosing culturally relevant texts is sufficient" (p. 468). For Kelly, guidance was provided through reflecting on her practices and participating in a book club where she could work to define what constitutes critical, anti-racist teaching. As Mosley's research indicates, teachers may understand the attributes of anti-racist, social equity teaching, but they may not necessarily be able to teach according to these perspectives without guidance.

Similar research has uncovered how early-career teachers display contrasting dimensions of social equity teaching (Lazar 2013). One of the teachers in Lazar's study (Nicole) articulated her understandings of social inequalities and committed herself to advancing the literacy development students in one urban school. Nicole

visited her students' homes, collaborated frequently with caregivers, and provided individual tutoring outside of class—all behaviors that align with social equity literacy teaching. Yet she harbored negative views of family practices, including the language and literacy practices within her students' homes. These deficit orientations precluded her from seeing students' communities through a wealth perspective (Yosso 2005), prompting questions about whether she could really recognize students' potential. Nicole possessed both individual and structural orientations but was still learning to see students' potential. Teacher development is uneven, as teachers may acquire some characteristics of thought and action associated with social equity teaching but not others.

Research on teacher development also raises questions about the capacity of teacher education programs to cultivate teachers' ability to care with political clarity, and how teachers' professional settings shape their ability or willingness to enact social justice goals. Whipp (2014) contrasted three teachers who were all educated in the same social-justice-oriented teacher education program, yet they exhibited many different types of caring. Ron, a White teacher who cared authentically and engaged in many culturally responsive practices, was reluctant to demand much from his high-school students because he felt the institutional and structural barriers they faced were insurmountable.

Ron contrasted with Angela, who possessed a number of attributes associated with being a warm demander. She cared deeply about students, set high expectations, and was relentless in pushing students to realize their potential. In addition to these practices, Angela engaged in "colour talk" (Roberts 2010), in which "marginalized teachers of color inform marginalized students of their same culture about the challenges and issues germane to being a member of that culture in the United States" (p. 458; citing Wilder 2000). Examples of Angela's talk included warnings to her black students about how they should conduct themselves in the company of police officers and how they need to be able to speak Standard English at certain times. While Angela engaged in these "warm demanding" behaviors, she did not challenge the scripted test-preparation lessons she was required to teach—practices she believed were detrimental to students. While she understood many of the sociopolitical realities of students and shared with them important insights about the politics of being Black in America, she did not challenge systems that she believed undermined her students' education.

Whipp also described Alex, a White teacher who displayed a broad range of characteristics associated with caring for political clarity. Alex not only understood the racial/ethnic realities of his students and how systems of inequality shaped their lives, but he was also actively involved in activism on a number of fronts including speaking out at faculty meetings, organizing teacher groups to advocate on behalf of students and teachers, and being active in his teachers union.

Whipp noted that each of these teachers took something different from their teacher education program. Their different enactments were also shaped by the different activity settings of their schools and districts. Whipp also explained that Alex's profile as one who cares with political clarity was relatively rare. Of the 17 teachers she studied who graduated from a teacher preparation program that

intentionally focused on issues of cultural diversity and social justice, only a few demonstrated caring with political clarity, a finding that she believed illuminated the deficiencies of their common teacher education program and teacher education programs generally.

The literature examined thus far indicates that development of early-career teachers toward a social equity orientation is:

1. distinct for each teacher, based on teachers' backgrounds, interactions within different activity settings such as teacher education programs and schools, and the economic, social, cultural, or symbolic assets they bring to their work;
2. uneven, in that teachers may demonstrate understandings about social equity teaching but not be able to put them into practice;
3. contradictory, in that a teacher may act in accord with some social equity perspectives yet may articulate views that are contrary to these perspectives;
4. shaped by a balance of discomforting and supportive influences.

These elements of teacher development are reflected in the narratives. In addition, the research on teacher resilience indicates that school policies and practices, the nature of teachers' work, the culture of schools, and teachers' relationships with school leaders and colleagues can impact teachers' commitment to their work. Not only do these activity settings have an influence on one's growth, but also a collective history of experiences acts on individuals and determines growth. Recall that in Rebekkah's case, her teaching practices were more heavily shaped by her schools' practices and policies than the critical pedagogy perspectives endorsed by her graduate program. Yet Brooke's case shows the confluence of personal and contextual factors in her development. Her graduate program was more influential in fostering her focus on critical pedagogy, quite possibly because she experienced subordination first hand and therefore empathized with the subordination of others.

Teacher-produced narratives can showcase teachers' emerging dispositions, knowledge, practices, and the ways these reflect social equity orientations. They can also reveal how the activity settings of teachers' homes, universities, classrooms, schools, and the communities surrounding their schools can impact opportunities to develop social equity understandings and practices.

6 Teacher Narrative as a Way of Knowing

This book relies on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) epistemology of "teacher as knower" to authenticate and capture early-career teachers' beliefs and experiences. Narrative inquiry is a way of knowing, thinking about, and studying one's experience. Teacher narratives offer a way to understand teachers' lived experiences through the "collaboration between the researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 20).

Within the genre of narrative writing, this book features focused autobiographical writing prompted by open-ended questions. The narratives include the pivotal events that led teachers to teach in underserved schools, their ways of relating to students, their teaching and advocacy efforts, and their reflections about these occurrences. These events, actions, and beliefs are historically, geographically, culturally and politically layered. Stories like these are complicated how they are framed and what teachers choose to reveal. The open-ended questions I provided to teachers produced different types of accounts with varied levels of descriptions of instructional activity, reflection, and intense "soul searching." As the initiator, I had to balance my requests to "tell more" with the need to avoid tainting them with my own leanings and biases. I will share more about this process in the next section.

A narrative needs to be taken for what it is—a recounting of experiences and thoughts based on the perspective of the writer. No matter how explicitly a teacher describes her students' language and/or actions, she cannot really capture how students are interpreting the experience of being in the classroom unless she also engages in rigorous and systematic data collection and analysis. It is also the case that, for teachers who may choose to share a few thoughts about an issue or a few examples of their teaching practices, the examples may or may not be illustrative of ongoing tendencies or dispositions. We must interpret them as descriptions of actions or thought. We can, however, compare these examples with more general concepts about successful teaching in underserved schools.

The equity-oriented frameworks that have been described in this chapter are used to guide a discussion about the narratives but not to judge teachers or their practices. None of the teachers were asked to write their narratives with these ideas in mind. Their inclusion or omission of these ideas is largely a reflection of their educational histories and particularly their experiences in teacher education programs and the formal and informal learning opportunities in their schools. It is understood that all early-career teachers occupy different development paths with respect to the attributes and enactments associated with successful teaching in underserved schools. It is also understood that the narratives are collections of vignettes that teachers choose to discuss; their discussion of events that mirror social equity teaching practices does not necessarily imply that teachers considered them as "social equity" practices or thought intentionally about the principles or theories connected with social equity teaching. Also, their omission of certain elements of social equity literacy teaching in their narratives does not necessarily mean that they did not think or act in these ways. The framework simply helps to organize a discussion of teachers' different ways of thinking and acting based on what they chose to share in the narratives.

The decision to limit the number of narratives in this book to five was based on the challenge of finding teachers who (1) remained in urban classrooms for more than three years, (2) displayed strong commitments to staying in urban education, (3) had been exposed to some of the principles associated with culturally sustaining and/or social justice teaching in their teacher education programs, and (4) were willing to spend part of their summers writing narratives. All of the teachers invited

to write narratives met these criteria. The limited number of narratives in the book makes it difficult to extrapolate from them to inform teacher education programs or professional-development policies. Their patterns of thought and action, particularly around social equity literacy teaching, can be compared with findings in the professional literature and further tested with larger, more representative populations of novice teachers in underserved communities.

7 Teacher Selection and Writing Narratives

The teacher narratives contained in this book began through my own inquiries about early-career teachers. I had maintained ties with three teachers (Megan, Clare, Rachael) who graduated from Saint Joseph's University and had taken positions in three urban districts. Clare had a one-year teaching position at a Catholic elementary school in Phoenix. After completing this assignment, she took a teaching position at another urban charter school in Philadelphia. Megan kept her first teaching job at an urban public school for three years and then transferred to another school in an adjacent urban neighborhood. Rachael stayed in the same school for the entire period. I twice invited Rachael to come to my university seminar classes to share her work in writing process pedagogy.

Through family acquaintances, I met Leslie, a third-year teacher and a Teach For America corps member who was invested in urban education and determined to remain a teacher in urban, underserved communities even though she had already satisfied her TFA commitment. She accepted a teaching position in Los Angeles, and after three years she took a job at a charter school in the Northeast. Leslie was in touch with another TFA colleague, Tracie, who had also retained a strong commitment to teaching despite being in a highly challenging school environment in an urban setting in the Southwest. With all of the controversies surrounding TFA, let me take a moment to address why it is important to include their narratives in this book.

A major criticism of TFA is that it puts the least-experienced teachers in the most-challenged classrooms (Carey 2004). Uncertified TFA recruits who enter classrooms with only about five or six weeks of preparation are less effective than similarly certified teachers (Darling-Hammond et al. 2005). The students of these novice TFA teachers perform less well on reading and mathematics tests than their counterparts who are taught by credentialed beginning teachers. Although the research on newly recruited TFA teachers is negative, the overall picture is more complicated. TFA teachers with more experience tend to be as effective as similarly experienced credentialed teachers.

Even though a comparatively small subsection of TFA teachers stay and grow to be excellent teachers, far too many leave the teaching profession. Only about 20 % of TFA teachers remain in teaching after three years (Heilig and Jez 2010). An 80 % turnover rate in TFA teachers translates to a continuing cycle of underprepared teachers filling vacancies in low-performing schools. The research presented in this chapter demonstrates that successful teachers in underserved communities

possess considerable knowledge about pedagogy and culturally sustaining teaching, so why focus on teachers who enter underserved classrooms with only a modicum of formal preparation in teaching?

Although I questioned whether TFA was a socially equitable solution to the problem of teacher quality in underserved communities, I felt it was important for Leslie and Tracie to contribute to the book. These teachers did not see TFA simply as something to do before moving on to another profession; they were invested in urban education for the long haul. Second, they wanted to be the best teachers they could be for their students. Their stories reflected the research on TFA teachers who are highly committed to improving their own pedagogical knowledge and practice to help students learn. Highly committed TFA teachers can make over a year and a half's gains in one year (Farr 2010). Based our initial communication, I placed Leslie and Tracie among the TFA recruits who were committed to urban education and making real gains with their students. Their stories were important for communicating what it takes to cope and learn when such little initial preparation is provided.

The five teachers' initial teacher-preparation backgrounds varied considerably. All had attended strong suburban schools and graduated from reputable universities. Leslie and Tracie entered urban classrooms with the least amount of initial teacher education preparation and took graduate courses to become certified in their first and second years of teaching.

Clare entered teaching with the most preparation as a graduate of a special education/elementary education undergraduate program and a graduate reading program. Megan had an undergraduate degree in elementary and special education. Rachael earned an international development and economics in undergraduate school and subsequently a master's degree in elementary education. As previously stated, all three received their teaching degrees from Saint Joseph's University, a Philadelphia-based Jesuit university that boasts a strong social-justice mission. In the teacher education department, this mission is exemplified by providing future teachers with courses that address the history of schooling, educational inequalities, linguistic diversity, culturally responsive pedagogies, and many urban-based school internships. The campus also offers many opportunities to volunteer in underserved communities, and students typically take advantage of this option.

Teachers were also varied in their racial/ethnic identification, although they were all raised in similar circumstances. All grew up in homes where English was spoken. Four of the teachers identified as White (Leslie, Clare, Megan, Rachael); Tracie identified as African American. Leslie and Rachael identified as Jewish, while the others did not identify a religious affiliation. Tracie frequently visited her elders and extended family who lived in an urban, primarily African American community. All of the teachers were exposed to literacy practices that are typically found in middle-class homes, including exposure to books and other reading materials, bedtime story routines, and talk about print. Economically, they considered themselves to be middle-class or upper-middle-class and could always rely on having their material needs satisfied.

All grew up in circumstances very different from many of their students whose families struggled financially and were exposed to a range of stressors associated with poverty, including inadequate access to health care, exposure to violence, substandard public schooling, and insufficient employment opportunities. Three taught in cities in western part of the U.S. (Leslie, Clare, Tracie); two worked in east coast cities (Rachael, Megan). Most taught emergent bilingual students (Tracie, Clare, Rachael, Leslie), while Megan taught predominantly African American students. Three taught in neighborhood public schools (Leslie, Megan, Tracie), one taught in a charter school (Rachael), and one taught in a Catholic school (Clare). All five teachers demonstrated their dedication to urban education. Since they began teaching, all but one remains in urban schools today (Rachael left after her fifth year to start a family).

8 How the Narratives Evolved

As a teacher-educator who has studied issues of culture and race in the development of literacy teachers (Lazar 2007; Lazar and Offenberg 2011; Lazar and Sharma 2014), I was interested in looking at teachers' devotion to urban teaching and the factors that were keeping them so committed to their work. I wondered about the circumstances that shaped such dedication—including how they grew up, the nature of their teacher education programs, and the kinds of support and opportunities they received in their schools. I wondered about how they interpreted and enacted many of the social-justice principles they had studied or were being exposed to in their graduate programs.

Driven by these questions, I applied for university funding to allow teachers to write about their early teaching experiences during the summers of 2011 and 2012. During the first summer, I provided some general prompts to guide their writing, including why they decided to become teachers in underserved schools, their beliefs about teaching, their literacy teaching practices, how they taught with culture in mind, the obstacles they faced and how they approached them, and why they continued to pursue this work. I invited them to include anecdotes and stories about real situations, including actual conversations between themselves and others in and beyond schools. All of the teachers structured their narratives around this general framework. They chose which elements of their experiences to tell, privileging some storylines and silencing others. Some teachers touched on the different levels of support they received in their schools—a point that I felt deserved a larger focus in order to more clearly understand the experience of being early-career teachers. The next summer, I invited the teachers to reread their narratives and extend those parts that related to how they were supported and/or constrained in their work. This effort resulted in narratives that included richer descriptions of teachers working within particular contexts. I was struck by their work, which mirrored many of the principles of social equity literacy teaching, particularly in the areas of recognizing educational inequalities, fostering their students' academic growth, and

intentionally considering students' lives and culture in their literacy teaching. I drew from these chapters to write about the typical and atypical attributes of the teachers and the circumstances that shaped their work.

At about this time, I invited Leslie to work with me to edit this book. Although I am a frequent visitor to urban schools, I do not have an insider's perspective on what it is like to teach in an urban school every day. Since Leslie has taught in three different schools since her first year, I thought it would be important for her to weigh in on the assertions made about early-career teachers and how schools can function to support them. Also, having spent most of my professional career in traditional teacher education programs, I knew little about alternative programs like TFA, except for what I had read in research articles. Leslie lends an authentic voice to the experiences of alternatively certified teachers.

When first sharing these chapters with two peer reviewers, we received some positive feedback. One reviewer noted that the narratives were "genuinely engaging" stories that take "an original approach to examining how and why teachers choose to teach in complex, urban schools in diverse, low socio-economic communities." We also received some criticisms that precipitated more revisions of the narratives and other parts of the book. Both reviewers indicated that the overall tone of the work was too celebratory in that it focused on the things teachers were doing well and not enough on the behind-the-scenes angst that teachers must have experienced while trying to establish themselves as professionals. At first, I thought these criticisms were unjustified. Here were first- and second-year teachers doing the very things that we in academia hope they will do—advocate for children, teach in culturally responsive ways, see the best in students, and deal with the challenges of urban schools. How rare and wonderful to be able to showcase these teachers' thoughts and practices.

Yet I also realized that my awe of these teachers had led me to focus much more on their victories than on the messier stresses and strains of growth they were experiencing during these very demanding years. I understood that it would helpful to readers if teachers could show how they managed the intense professional learning they were experiencing in this stage of their careers. I invited them to reread their narratives to focus on instances where their literacy teaching was most puzzling and to share their doubts, thoughts, and/or questions during in these times. There was no funding left for summer writing at this juncture; I could only hope that they would be willing to write about teaching events from the distant past. And they were. This effort resulted in more in-depth pieces that included vivid descriptions of intense learning.

The narratives that appear in this book help us understand the conditions that set these five teachers on a path toward teaching in underserved communities, the settings and structures that affected their ability to learn and grow, and the different forms of social equity teaching that surfaced in their beliefs and teaching practices. The teachers first discuss how they came to teach in high-poverty communities and the range of experiences that propelled them toward this work. They also describe their orientations toward teaching and their teaching practices. They discuss how they motivate and engage students, organize the classroom, model and demonstrate,

modify instruction, assess students' progress, communicate with caregivers, teach critically, and integrate students' knowledge traditions into literacy learning. While they share many things that worked well, they also periodically pause to question their practices and share instances that were particularly challenging. They also explain how they cultivated ideas for teaching through professional books, collaborations with colleagues, or through their programs. Last, teachers describe the impact of their work on their personal and professional lives and on the lives of students.

These chapters are followed by Chapter "Unpacking Teachers' Narratives: Dimensions of Social Equity Teaching Revealed" which synthesizes the pivotal experiences that shaped teachers' social justice leanings and the ways their beliefs and practices mirror elements of social equity literacy teaching.

Chapter "What School Leaders and Teacher Mentors Can Do To Support Teachers for Social Equity" focuses on recommendations for school leaders and teacher mentors based on the narratives, the research literature, and some additional teacher reflections about this topic. It calls for major reforms in school leadership to enhance the retention of early-career teachers.

Chapter "Teacher Education Programs that Prepare Teachers for Social Equity" draws from the narratives and the research to look critically at teacher education and the types of reforms that are needed to better produce and support teacher candidates for underserved communities.

We wanted to save the last word for the teachers. In Chapter "Sound Advice From Teachers to Future and Practicing Teachers", each teacher provides words of advice for students of education and practicing teachers in underserved communities. Teachers generously offer advice on everything from great books and articles to read, to how to collaborate with colleagues when times are difficult, to how early-career teachers need to take care of themselves physically, intellectually, and psychologically.

9 Conclusion

Overhauling education in underserved communities not only requires investments by educators but also significant changes in public-school funding and societal perceptions of people who live in these communities (Ravitch 2013). The narratives of five young women who sought teaching careers in urban communities reveal much about their backgrounds, beliefs, and practices and how different activity settings shaped their ability to learn and grow. Their testimonials offer precious evidence for reexamining teacher education toward a social equity focus and how teachers can be better supported to teach in underserved schools.

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"Be the change you wish to see."

Clare Rachko

Abstract Clare Rachko describes her early teaching experiences in a combination first- and second-grade classroom at a Catholic school in Phoenix. Having spent four years volunteering in an urban school as an undergraduate student, Clare developed strong social justice leanings by the time she graduated from college with certifications in elementary and special education. She stayed in her teacher education program for an additional year to become certified in reading. Clare brought this knowledge to her first teaching position and created a transformative curriculum that included culturally responsive literature and critical examinations of stereotypes and issues of power. She also worked to balance the teaching of literacy skills with authentic literacy engagements. By linking with students' caregivers, Clare learned of their unique circumstances, including the undocumented status of some community members.

Keywords Caregivers · Critical literacy · Culturally relevant/Sustaining literature

1 Introduction

The desire to teach came at a young age. I conducted an imaginary classroom, forcing my younger sister and other friendly victims to be students completing grueling worksheets and tests in Ms. Rachko's "classroom." I remember eagerly awaiting the second grade so I could visit my aunt's classroom and participate in a tradition extended to all of her nieces to be the teacher's special guest and helper for the day. But my transition in thinking came from stepping outside of my bubble that was suburbia and into the pulsing and contrasting culture of the urban classroom. In simplest terms, I knew that with the appropriate schooling and skills gained at a good university, I could teach, especially in the classrooms where materials seemed

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to appear at the slightest whim and parents seem to jump at the chance to offer their children any support. Basically, I had always thought where there is money, there is a sufficient education. But I was thirsty for a challenge and a purpose beyond sharing academic knowledge. *Be the change you wish to see in the world.* Yeah, that had me all over it. So I made the informed decision to attend a university where I knew I would see culturally and economically diverse communities and where I could challenge my predetermined beliefs and face the reality outside of my Pleasantville rearing.

2 My Journey

I grew up in the house next to the neighborhood playground in Pennsylvania suburbia until the third grade. My childhood was filled with games of freeze-tag, pumping legs to get the highest on the swings, riding bikes in the driveway that I shared with my best friend's family, climbing trees, and scaling jungle gyms. Summers involved walking a few blocks to splash around in the pool with neighborhood friends, yearning for the day when we could pass our deep end test and at the glorified age of thirteen take the independent swimmer test and go to the pool without our parents.

Our suburban homes were sandwiched between a high security prison and a juvenile detention center, where my dad had been employed for over 25 years. His mother did not want him to take the job upon graduating college. It was dangerous, and it didn't pay enough. My mother's father thought it was too risky to raise a family and did not want his daughter living in that neighborhood. And yes, this school served primarily African American and Latino adolescent boys. But it remains my home to this day and in some ways is my primary reference for cultural difference. Growing up, I was told that this was the place where "bad kids ended up." But in my direct experiences with the students I never viewed them as such. I recall them always doing "the Battling Bulls wave," their enthusiastic and musical cheers at all the sporting events at the center, and how they would politely move out of the way for me at the snack bar. But they were also disciplined this way, and they had to follow a strict rulebook. My parents explained that the students were there because of the choices they had made.

As an elementary school student, I was welcomed by walls of colorful store-bought posters surrounded by displays of student masterpieces. Shelves of books, a fully stocked library with a librarian, a nurse available every day of the week, a computer lab, friendly faces of parent volunteers, and all the extracurricular activities one would expect. My middle school was a close-knit parochial school, which had a familial feeling the second I walked in the door. I received individualized attention and a community that contributed much to my personal growth. Later, I attended a college preparatory high school that prepared me for the next educational step and beyond.

I went off to college and had my opportunity to begin to stretch. I didn't wander very far, a mere forty-five minutes from my home. But my world was about to be transformed as I began my journey as an educator and walked into my first Philadelphia classroom. Passing the security guard at the front door signaled that this was much different from Glen Oakes Elementary. The building was old and somewhat dilapidated, and most of the artwork was the hand-made contribution of school faculty. The nurse was sporadic, and I never even saw a library. The teachers were a mix of those who were eager to make a difference intermingled with the veteran teachers reaching their breaking point after facing the lack of resources and, with that, a lack of caring and concern from the district for far too long. There was still a desire to learn and to achieve, but there was more adversity with the looming shadows of No Child Left Behind and the Everest-like climb to reaching AYP (Annual Yearly Progress).

One thing that stood out so much more prominently amid the decaying décor, the low test scores, and the lack of resources was that in this Philadelphia public school nearly all the students were African American. Obviously, something was going on here. I was confused and angry. How did this happen? I was changed. I had fallen head first into the achievement gap.

During my crawl toward the end of this long tunnel, I credit my light-bulb moment to one particular student and one particular scene. When I knew I was officially hooked into this career, and even more this calling to teach where there was a culture different from my own, there was a conflict I had yet to face. She was a fourth grader at an after-school-mentoring program. I began volunteering in the program during my sophomore year of college. I was told I was being given a "challenging" group of girls, that they would test me to the brink of wanting to throw in the towel, but really what was being said was, you are new blood, new flesh, so let's see what you got. No one else in their right mind wants this group. Ready, set, *go*.

Madea called every bluff, she told it like it was, and her shrill voice and sassy swagger told me she was born and raised to give any opposition absolute hell in the form of pounding headaches and tearful car rides home. One afternoon, hearing the pitch of Madea's voice from the moment I stepped foot in the building, I shuffled into the assigned classroom which I shared with a newer mentor. *Deep breath, collect your composure and any patience you can muster, enter, Ms. Clare*. Madea was spouting off about her teacher that day, spitting her venom in the direction of "Ms. Isaboo" (as she and the other girls dubbed my co-mentor) and me. I came in wide-eyed and confused as to what the hell was going on, but she clued me in soon enough: "You people come in here and you think got the Kool-aid, but you ain't got the flava. You Splenda, we Sweet-n-Low."

I had no idea what the problem was, but I knew what *you people* meant. Madea's metaphor clued me in to the fact that I was not ackowedging or confronting the impact of my Whiteness. This was a most abrasive greeting, and I didn't expect it. I was the White authority figure coming on to her turf to try and do right, but I was not educated as she was. I was not acknowledging my White privilege and what that meant in my role here. I did not know the code she knew as a young Black

female born and raised in Southwest Philly. She was Sweet-n-low and I was Splenda. No matter what you say, you *can* taste the difference.

So how do you cross that bridge? How do you merge worlds that at times seem further apart than galaxies? I kept showing up, and I kept caring. Easy enough, right? Absolutely not. It tested every nerve in my body, every trick in my Mary Poppins bag, and everything I thought I knew. Madea ripped it all apart by challenging and altering my notions of what a teacher in an urban environment should look like. I learned how to earn Madea's and the other girls' trust by meeting in the middle and compromising. Homework breaks where we could have a quick round of *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance*, where I could enter their worlds and I could let my guard down and show my humanity, dancing and singing like the White girl I am. Laughter really was the best medicine. But most importantly I showed up and kept showing up. For four years I was *there*. Madea was the best teacher I've ever had in being successful in an urban classroom. And now almost six years later, as I keep in touch with members remaining in the program, it looks like we saved each other. No one understood what I needed to break down my predisposed notions like Madea did, and somehow I figured out how to get under her skin and convince her to trust me to enter her world.

My college experiences only dulled the itch crawling under my skin. I knew I couldn't only confine my experience to one city in one state with one population. Some people call it crazy. Why would you? How do you? What is the matter with you!? I laugh because I don't know the answer, and I don't care if I ever find out. Whatever floats your boat, right? Well, my sails took me toward a volunteer organization that would help place me in a school for a one-year commitment. And despite the lack of beaches I ended up docking in Phoenix, Arizona. I knew no Spanish but had signed up for a position as the English teacher for first and second grade in a small, urban, parochial school. The students split their instructional time between Spanish and English, and I was responsible for teaching reading and language arts, science, and social studies while also making time for students to receive religious instruction from my classroom aide. I had just decided to uproot myself from my comfort zone and throw my heart and soul into the fire, both literally and figuratively. Teaching in triple digit temperatures is no easy feat. Ultimately, I credit the fact that I wanted to give something back for the greater good, a thank you directed at the entire human race for the fact that I am fully aware of the blessed and privileged upbringing I had, that even I at times take for granted. My education and my rearing are nothing to scoff at, and I wanted to be that teacher for someone else, and I wanted to do it out of the goodness of my heart. But I also have this unquenchable thirst to learn, so send me to the trenches, please. Not even my parents could wrap their heads around what possessed their daughter. I guess I am like my father in more ways than I would like to admit. A challenge? I think so.

3 My Teaching

I was intrigued at what the parallels would be working in this environment. In Philadelphia I taught in classrooms of primarily African American students; now I would be teaching at a school that was 99 % Latino. Furthermore, I faced the infusion of politics as the war on the border crept into my classroom to consume the minds of seven- and eight-year-olds. As Gary Howard describes in *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* (2006), my degrees of White identity were stretched in different directions. I was no longer thinking about whiteness and relative affluence in relation to the African American students I had previously taught. Now I thought about myself as a White American and the significance of citizenship on the kind of education a person can receive in this country. I thought I had begun to overcome the guilt associated with the realization that with whiteness comes great power, transitioning to the thought that I had a choice to use that power to assume some of the responsibility and owning it in a positive and constructive fashion. I could teach. I could do more than have power; I could share power with my students. And now the fact that I am a citizen escalated that gap and it was daunting. It was frustrating to me that my students' opportunity to be adequately educated was hindered because their rights were limited. They weren't free.

My students were not inferior; they were not unteachable. Who has the authority to say something so condescending? They brought beautifully rich stories that I had never heard before and enhanced my classroom beyond what I could have imagined. So, I was grateful for this disequilibrium, this opportunity to learn and to teach. I had to use the language barrier and make it into a bridge. I had to tap into the culture that was represented in my classroom. Unfortunately, I had to make mistakes to get there. I only hope my students have learned as much from me as I have from them.

It is amazing being in Arizona. Immigration plays such a huge role. Many caregivers aren't documented citizens. Second graders worry that they will be stranded at school because they live in constant fear that their parents will be picked up by the deportation police. The older kids knew the ins and outs of what legal status means. Despite the fact that many of my students were born in the U.S. and were citizens, their parents and guardians are left to float in limbo. The kids go home at 3:10 each day to see if their caretakers were picked up for "being brown" and shipped to the prisons on the border. Some families choose homeless shelters, food banks, drug sales, stripping, or being hired illegally in sub-human conditions over leaving the dream of America to return to Mexico. Their children are worth it; their education is worth it. It is astounding and heartbreaking.

Considering the circumstances, maintaining parent and guardian relationships is difficult. Working often interferes with daily interactions, so parent-teacher conferences are precious opportunities, if I can make scheduling work. When I do meet guardians, there is about a 50 % chance that I will not be able to communicate with them without a translator beyond the feeble Spanish greetings I have collected from my high school and college education. I am sure I sound ridiculous as they wave,

nod and walk on. Phone calls posed the same problem, so when having to address Spanish-speaking families I often have to turn to my Spanish partner teacher to make the call for me and relay the discussion back to me. But there are always questions about home that I dare not ask. Who is a citizen? Whose family is suffering and how?

At first, these thoughts were a weight I carried with me, and they wreaked havoc on my mind and body. Stress stole my sleep, some weight (which was perfectly okay with me), my emotional stability, countless hours, and in exchange left me with the habit of grinding my teeth and having after-school panic attacks. Instead of draining me completely, it fueled me. It was the first year kick in the ass I needed to get me through my Monday through Friday, the show-your-face part of the job.

Through literature I was able to enter their world and not seem like an intruder. Sure, the current education system seems to want to tell you that our students, especially “high-risk” children, are struggling with the most basic concepts. I nearly had a heart attack after gleefully picking up my second graders’ first reading test, thinking I had done a great job fulfilling the requirements of a comprehensive reading block. Well, according to those scores, I bombed. Reality check, week three. This was going to be a hell of a year. The scripted anthology I used just didn’t work. I guess I can’t blame this book entirely. I was the one who *actually* used it. But here it was. I knew they had a world knowledge way beyond this textbook, so I decided to tap into it.

When I stepped outside of my narrow curriculum box, my kids responded well. We swallowed real literature whole while also tasting skill building without them even knowing I had slipped it into their mid-morning snack. It was deceitful and delightful. Luckily for me, my principal was a free-reign kind of lady. She knew I was teaching, she knew I had a handle on one of the rowdiest bunches in the school, and she knew I was passionate about my work. She let me fly, and I credit her for my butterfly metamorphosis. I closed the door to my classroom for the first time that August morning, and I was allowed to be creative and leave aside many of the cautions that come with the high-stakes atmosphere that we currently teach in. And I also had room to make my own mistakes, to swivel my desk chair around to face a dusty chalk rail and, at times, cry. But I also had room to get up again and grow. I had received the opportunity of a lifetime. I got the freedom to teach.

Some of my kids were homeless. Malinal lived in a domestic violence family shelter after watching her father beat her mother for most of her childhood. She was quiet and well-behaved, the kind of student easily overlooked in a classroom when dealing with Bert who would solicit other first graders for sex or call a peer a “pussy” to show his disdain towards him. Yes, my hands were full. Her docile demeanor often comforted her third grade sister who, for the first semester of school, entered and exited the school the same way, in hysterics. A mother who drove the girls with her daughter to and from school once told me Malinal was too embarrassed to cry at school, especially since her sister had a reputation as the one who made a scene, but at home she would weep and sob, coping with the loss of a father and a fear of him in the same fell swoop. They were hiding from him while the mother tried to find work.

I sat with Joseph's mother while she wept at her son's parent-teacher conference, gasping into tissues while spinning a devastating tale translated to me. Her husband had been pulled over. He had been living and working here, paying taxes and contributing to our American economy, but he had no papers. She was going to have to support her five boys alone, facing the reality of a grocery store bagger wages and no documentation herself. They were draining their finances on an attorney while having to prepare themselves for the fact that he would most likely face three months in jail in a border city and then be sentenced to deportation.

What do you do with that as a teacher? You have no control over the hand they are dealt and how the game is played. You get the hours of seven to three, five days a week, for about 10 months of the year. That's what you control, the time you spend with them in hopes that they might remember you when you aren't there. So you take what you are given, and you roll with it. I chose to address the issues I couldn't check at the door and make them mine.

I decided to start with the first graders after grappling with the issues of Malinal and Joseph. We addressed homelessness and stereotypes. This was basic yet real stuff. Who is bad and who is good? Why do you think so? Reeling them in with pictures of cartoon characters and then slowly sliding in printed photographs of people of different ethnicities. Happy, friendly people were good; mean and angry looking people were bad. Pretty natural instincts, right? After all, Ursula stole Ariel's voice in *The Little Mermaid*, and Scar threw Mufasa off a cliff in the *Lion King*. They aren't the greatest individuals in my book either, but the media portrayed morality as simple as light versus dark. I wanted them to question this. In our tight back-carpet circle, kids squirming over one another to insert their thoughts, we looked at the trends. People of color were bad, even with smiles, and most of the reasoning was, "They look mean." Even the sole African American student in the class had nothing to say against this defense. This was the world of first grade, cut and dry. I said nothing, just soaked it in, reveling in their innocence.

Then there were the drawings and short sentences. I gave simple instructions without much elaboration: *Draw what you think a homeless person looks like, and write a sentence describing your work of art*. I won them over with our broken collection of mismatched crayons. But here they were thinking and addressing their own stereotypes, sharing their interactions with the homeless that were so prevalent in the optimal weather conditions in Arizona. They displayed homeless men outside of the local convenient store, begging for money, committing violent acts, or some other crime, like stealing. Most students cast the homeless in a negative light.

Now that our ideas were gathered, our minds had been warmed up, now it was time for the true mental exertion; it was time to open a book. We displayed all of our thoughts, which had not been disputed, just pure brainstorms in circles and squares in one of Ms. Rachko's crazy word maps, displaying their pre-conceived notions. Then we invited the author Eve Bunting into our classroom and introduced the students to her characters in *Fly Away Home* (1993). In this text, the issue of homelessness is addressed as a father and a son live in an airport. The father has lost his job shortly after the death of his wife. They must live a covert life and make a little money to try to save enough to live elsewhere. In this childhood struggle the

boy finds meaning in a bird accidentally flying inside the airport's automatic doors and, eventually, being set free.

The students were enthralled. This boy was not mean, not scary, and neither was his father. They were struggling, and they were together, and they were living in an airport. They even understood the symbolism of the bird. Clara raised her arm while sitting in impeccable crisscross position, ballerina posture, to disclose that the little boy wanted to be able to leave the airport and go outside and be free like the bird. How do you assess a child who can pull that from her beautifully molded brain? I suppressed my excitement and ventured on.

I knew that many of my students lived in dire economic circumstances. They knew sacrifice. At times they themselves were vulnerable to homelessness. They knew that their parents were in and out of work and how this affected their day-to-day lives. Joseph swore that where he ate out every night was a restaurant, not a food bank. Darren asserted that his Mom had lost her job because she slept too much, and he had three dads that at one time or another lived with him. Their stories started exploding into the air like bright fireworks on the fourth of July. They could tell their stories and not be ashamed. It was frightening and invigorating. My master plan had worked. This was the beginning of a great start on a path toward critical teaching.

Language was a barrier for some. Of the 16 students in my class, two were still in the beginning stages of learning English, but most students were relatively bilingual. They didn't even realize how lucky they were, at the young age of seven, gaining fluency in two languages. Then there were my two lady friends who were primarily Spanish speakers. Acilina was toothless, but she compensated with her Rapunzel-like hair, falling in cascades down her short torso. She sat in the middle of the group when the first graders filed in for the first time, wide-eyed, yet mostly smiling. She was hoping to remain invisible, though you could not miss such a beautiful round face; she relied on her peers to speak for her. After discussing her background with my Spanish-teaching counterpart, I learned that she was excelling in Spanish but due to her primary language being the sole language spoken at home, she was frustrated and fearful of failure at having to grapple with the harsh tones of a new language. Quite frankly this student intimidated me.

I trod quietly. I met her with every ounce of grace, patience, and all the smiles I could muster and pulled her close. I found that Acilina had more spoken English proficiency, which was helpful when addressing phonemic awareness. She attempted to use a few English words, but was intimidated by the unfamiliar. I held her hand through the process, the basics through finger pointing, tapping out words, and investigating letter-sound correlations. Literacy stations were a blessing for her and the other students. This meant I could focus on one small group at a time, and the rest of the students learned the independence they needed to control their own literacy learning. Acilina began to acquire more English, and soon, even in whole-group lessons, her hand would shoot up in the air when she knew she had the answer. Ponytail swinging, it was pleasantly shocking. She was getting it, and we were getting it.

I was excited for this parent-teacher conference: I was going to have great news. Her mother had been concerned and had expressed it to Senora, my partner teacher, and now I could tell her that Acilina was making phenomenal progress. But before I could say so, her mother was talking rapidly and somewhat excitedly to Senora. Senora turned to me and told me that Acilina's mother was happy to find her daughter was no longer afraid to come to the English part of her day. She *liked* it; she liked me. I thought I would weep. It does feel great to win.

Acilina inspired me to delve into literature that mirrored her heritage. I found a character in the story *La Mariposa* (Jiménez 2000), a first grade boy whose family comes to America and struggles through school, never knowing exactly what is going on because he does not know the language. We started, as was our routine now, with a sometimes-grueling process to make their first-grade light bulb flash on. Progress is a process. We took the appropriate avenues to discover the themes of being understood, learning, and feeling different. We constructed a word map while also filling out anticipation guide questionnaires to see where we all stood about certain ideas. The anticipation guide was their ticket to the back carpet where we shared stories. They defended some of their ideas, and we dove in. This was the first time we had ventured into a story without many illustrations, so patience was a virtue. But we got through and hit the necessary stops. We discussed what it would feel like not to know a language and being somewhat abandoned and disciplined by your teacher for it. They made sure to reassure me that I was good teacher, not a bad one. I crossed my fingers that they were being as brutally honest as usual, such as when they ask me, "What did you do to your hair, Ms. Rachko?" or pointing out my latest pimple, asking equally inquisitively and disgusted, "What is that on your face?" I usually joked by saying it was the result of working with them. Somehow that usually sufficed.

The month of February brought the usual teacher-oriented thoughts. Should I spend the next 28 days dedicated to African American history? Well, that seemed a little bit exclusive if you ask me, especially since only three students out of 38 identified themselves as African American. Most of my literature focused on themes related to African American heritage, so I thought I would focus on Civil Rights and relate it to the experiences of all oppressed people. I knew they hadn't participated in discussions surrounding this topic before so I wanted to open their eyes and expand their horizons and their vocabulary. Why can't second graders understand the history of Whites and people of color? I thought we could manage it.

I decided to start in my second-grade literature block. It was time to emerge from the stories that I considered to be getting mundane as I felt I had compensated for some of the skills they lacked. Their test scores had improved, the way they needed to be met in reading was improving (on my part), and we were succeeding in the world of reading. They were so excited when I handed out "real" books, not textbooks that there were fights over who would hand them out despite the fact that the paper passer was given this honor, bestowed during our highly competitive job-changing ceremony. This ceremony came with blissful silence for ten minutes, with the exception of the jeers when the job was only awarded to one person. It got them every time. Their enthusiasm to even hold the books in their hands fueled my fire; this was going to be fun teaching, real teaching, teaching that I owned.

I had already addressed an issue that permeated our second grade classroom from the get-go. I had a class of thirteen boys and seven girls. I thank God my girls were angels, because the boys gave me a run for my money. I had never seen such bullying and aggression in such little people, and I felt I had spent from August to October focusing on classroom management, behavioral strategies, and disciplinary measures. If I didn't before, I perfected talking firmly, placing my hands on my hips in a disapproving manner, and giving the meanest teacher look I could muster. Eventually there was yelling. I resorted to yelling, convincing myself that it just got my point across in a much louder manner. In hindsight, I realize what could have been done differently on my end. The supportive structures I failed to instill could have helped them. But in sweltering Phoenix as a first year teacher, it was baptism by fire, no pun intended.

Before introducing the Civil-Rights unit, I wanted students to understand oppression on a personal level. I did this by reading aloud a book about bullying, *Jake Drake, Bully Buster* (Clements 2007). This book mesmerized the students, and it prompted many discussions about how one person could hold power over another. I then selected two texts, *Freedom Summer* (2001) by Deborah Wiles and *Freedom River* (Rappaport 2000). *Freedom Summer* displays a friendship between Black and White adolescent boys, John Henry and Joe, during the Civil Rights movement. They spend their summers together and are excited to hear that the town pool will be opened to people of all races. Their seemingly innocent friendship is tested when they find the pool filled with asphalt by White authority figures and they must decide how to act. *Freedom River* tells the story of a freed slave, John Parker, who helps others escape across the Ohio River into the safe haven of Ohio so that families can continue to journey further north.

My overall objective in using these texts was to discuss power. I wanted to provide them with a concept that was applicable across curriculums and settings. I knew my literature selection was as limited as my bank account had become, so despite the fact that I struggled finding age-appropriate stories, I thought I could teach them a theme that stretched beyond the pages of the books.

They were used to the way we started books, and it was always a worthwhile struggle, building our concept maps, invading their space by really digging around in their bountiful brains and seeing what I could glean among dreams of recess and lunch menus. We were throwing out wonderful words: different, power, abuse, help, and fairness. They were all strewn in colorful boxes and ovals, arrows mapping out our direction of thought, a chaotic glimpse of my own mental processing. We made our prediction and we were off, flying out of second grade in Phoenix, Arizona, on our magic carpet.

They were entranced by *Freedom Summer*. Did this really happen? Why can't everyone go swimming? That would be an absolutely absurd concept in Arizona. But again, the fireworks went off when Amelia grasped my concept and made it her own. It took some pruning and prodding, nudging them to keep treading in the right direction, but the words were unfurling themselves like popcorn kernels. John Henry wouldn't be a fire fighter because he was Black, he ate in a separate room because he was Black, and he couldn't choose his own ice cream pop because he

was Black. Who had the power? Students guessed the White people did. They were the ones who filled up the pool with asphalt so that John Henry and all the African Americans in his community couldn't swim. My students were captivated by the beautiful illustration of John Henry gazing at them, eyes brimming with tears. "*Why?*" my students asked. We talked about how this did not have to happen. White people in the story could make different choices; they could be allies to people of color. Conversation ensued over the ending when John Henry enters the store, arms linked with his White best friend, Joe, his own nickel in hand. Amelia said Joe was going to see what it was like for John Henry and he was a good White person, an ally. My little caterpillar became a butterfly, and I felt like there were pterodactyls in my stomach. Had this really just happened, and had it worked? I was ready to find out.

Reading and discussing the story *Freedom River* had a similar effect, although I don't think I totally won their hearts over. The characters were not as developed, and there was no young voice for them to hear ring in their own ears to which they could respond and relate. I decided it was time to release responsibility and have pairs of students read the books together and help each other write responses to questions about their stories. They loved this freedom, when after introductions and instructions they had control over their learning. I too loved the freedom of being able to wander and become a lingering shadow, only to be called upon when someone needed me. I helped them with a troublesome word or a question they had with the reading.

Arranging students in pairs gave me the opportunity to provide certain students who struggled in reading the support of stronger peers or from me, but it also offered me the room to step back and watch their light bulbs click on and off. It was not easy, it took practice, and there were many wrong answers before the right ones came. There were many incomplete sentences scribbled that had to be erased and re-thought. There was modeling, re-teaching, correcting, more re-teaching, and scaffolding, but at the end of it all there was communal learning.

Their approximations gave me insight into what I needed to teach. I had them completing compendiums that built upon different skills, mainly vocabulary and word knowledge as well as inferencing and critical thinking by questioning the author. I wanted them to be *thinkers*, not re-callers. I wanted them to know how to meet a text and become active readers, and as was our motto, to look for a message, because that's what good readers do.

Social studies was always a struggle for my students. Many of them had not had the opportunities to venture beyond Arizona, but some had seen Mexico, California, or places where they had family. When students in grades kindergarten through four went bowling as a field trip, it was a first for many of them. This was also the case when we ventured to the zoo. Most of my students lived in areas colored more by gangs, violence, and drugs rather than beautiful buildings, gardens, parks, and stores that are welcoming and physically attractive. I wanted to show them the endless possibilities while also engaging our social studies curriculum of being good citizens and positive and active members of the community. I was trying to open this up for them with books. *City Green* (DiSalvo-Ryan 1994) lent itself to

discussions of community building as a young girl rallies her neighbors to change a run-down lot into a beautiful garden.

Continuing with our Black history focus, I used the book *Band of Angels* (Hopkinson 2002), which allowed us to explore the particulars of slavery and the struggle of Black people long after slavery ended. They knew who Rosa Parks was, as well as Martin Luther King Jr., but the fictional character Ella was an African American young woman striving to be a singer against all odds. She struggled to attend college to join an all-African-American singing group which has difficulty performing in front of White audiences. Success comes to her when she is reminded of her ancestors' struggles and she sings their songs, the old spirituals. This was reachable for my students because many of them had dreams of becoming famous whether by sports, theatre, dancing, or singing. Ella also made an effort to educate herself. I accentuated this, knowing that many of their guardians did not have high levels of education themselves. I knew that for some I needed to be that advocate. The teacher in this children's story was also White and was an ally of this Black choir and supported them, against public opinion. This text solidified the definition of an ally in a concrete fashion. We were getting somewhere here, and I liked where we were going.

We ended the year with the challenge of a short chapter book. I splurged and ordered enough copies of Roald Dahl's *Magic Finger* (2009) to have a book for each pair of students. Although this did not quite fit into our compilation of texts discussing race and the power struggle of discrimination, it confronted what I considered to be another valid and approachable issue for my students. After all, who likes being confined in the box? This story is a fantastical twist on animal rights felt by an avid adolescent. She despises the unwarranted killing of animals, and when she discovers her neighbors joyfully hunting ducks, her magic finger gets the best of her and she turns them all into the victims. These characters get to walk or waddle around in their victim's feathers and see what it's like to be the prey, and the ducks get to take control and teach these humans a lesson. Power struggle? I think so. We filled out anticipation guides after completing concept maps and discussed issues as they appeared in the chapter of the day. We discussed how to use our power and our abilities in positive ways, constructive means of expressing emotions and beliefs, as well as animal rights. I had molded my students' minds to think about these big ideas.

4 The Impact

I feel I had many achievements and small victories. Many of my students *got it*. But in reflecting, I know there are many areas I could have improved, things I should have said. One failure I feel I had was not addressing their personal issues head on. No children's author to my knowledge has addressed the deportation issue in a way that is comprehensible to young children. Despite relevant texts discussing issues of immigrants, there has not been much said about the undocumented in America and how the children who had no choices are affected. After all the readings and

discussions about power and allies, I wish I could have turned it over to them to see what they could share with me. I could have let them be the authors.

There is much to lose and to gain in a job where you work with struggling members of society, especially if they are children. In some ways they steal your heart and soul. It can be quite draining; you can’t help but care and at times be overly concerned with coming to their aid. What do you do when you have to sit in the office with Bert and wait for the police to explain to him that he cannot threaten to kill his whole class, especially after he chased his peer, George, with a sharpened pencil around my classroom, saying he was going to stab him? I knew his story. I knew his mother and grandmother struggled with drug abuse and his father was deported. Yet he had to be respectful to his peers. For kids like this, transitioning between home and school is difficult. There are days where my sanity was severely threatened. But at the end of the day, my students gave me so much more goodness than heartaches.

One of my mentors, Mr. G, told me in the beginning months of the teaching, “If you can teach here, you can teach anywhere.” In fact, he repeated it constantly, as if it were some term of endearment. He told me after we became close friends that I gave him “that Rachko death look” as a response when he told me that: “You looked like you were going to kill me.” In some ways I thought I had already learned this lesson about teaching in challenging environments and circumstances. What a conceited generalization that was. My first and second graders taught me so much. At their root and most basic element they are still children; they just live in different soil. But from that, we grew together, and I am forever changed and eternally grateful.

I have never felt so loved as I have working in this population, with my students. After a few months, there wasn’t a day that went by that I wasn’t called Mom, and at times it was intentional. I had many hats to wear; teacher was just one of them. I was a magician after this year in mastering the fact that I could pull things directly from the air at the time. In many ways, my 38 students taught me how to be a real teacher this year. They taught me how to conform to their needs, not my own. It is just a matter of listening. And although my students all wanted a Nintendo DSI for Christmas, they were still grateful for the things they did receive. Yes, I still had to remind them to say their thank-you’s, but even just receiving your attention, your smile, your high-five and your secret handshake, or totally flipping out with praise like a goon in front of the whole class, they just ate that stuff up. At least I could finally be considered cool in a crowd; it only took 24 years. They boosted my self-confidence. Even after days that I felt two inches tall, someone would leave me a note on my desk that said, “Ms. Rachko, you have nice shoes,” or someone would reach up and hold my hand on the walk to lunch. They knew that I needed it.

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“I am doing work with great purpose.”

Rachael Chou

Abstract Rachael Chou taught first graders in an urban charter school in the mid-Atlantic region that was founded by an arts organization and an immigrant rights group. Years earlier she pursued a career as an aid worker after having studied issues of poverty, economics, and international development. A series of circumstances led her to volunteer at the charter school and her interest in teaching blossomed. Rachael subsequently obtained a teaching degree in elementary education so she could return to this school to teach. As a new teacher, Rachael discusses how she created a positive and empowering learning environment for her students, one filled with authentic, respectful, and culturally meaningful literacy events. Rachael enjoyed high levels of support at the school, including collaborating with a partner teacher, linking with caregivers, and attending university seminars that addressed reading- and writing-workshop approaches.

Keywords Authentic literacy engagements · Empowering environments · Workshop approaches

1 Introduction

“I am not even in this class!” Aurelio yelled as he walked into my classroom. It was October, and he had just been held back from second grade into my first grade classroom. “I am in Teacher Liz’s class. I don’t even know what I am doing here!” he yelled as I coaxed him into my room. “I know you are in Teacher Liz’s class. Remember, your mom said you are going to try out my class for a while and see if you might come be with us this year?” I asked knowing I was not exactly telling him the truth but hoping it would help him adjust.

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"Well, that is not what my mom told me. I don't even know…. I don't even know what is going on here!" Aurelio exclaimed as he slammed his backpack onto the ground.

"Come over here, and I will show you your cubby," I said. Aurelio dragged his backpack along the ground. My students looked at me with trepidation. Aurelio will certainly change our classroom dynamics, I thought. How will Aurelio fit into our peaceful little community? Will other students think they can behave as he does? My dramatic introduction to Aurelio was one of many dilemmas I encountered as a first grade teacher at a Title I K-8 charter school which I will call Honor. Located in a low-income urban district in the mid-Atlantic region, Honor was founded in 2006 by an arts organization and an immigrants' rights group. Honor was founded on respecting our students' home cultures and languages and using the arts in teaching. It is free and there is a lottery that determines which students get to attend each year. Our student population is officially 80 % low income, and 40 % of our students receive English as a Second Language support. Most of our students speak a language other than English at home. The heritage of about 70 % of our students is Chinese, and many others are Indonesian, Vietnamese, African American, Latino, biracial students, and we also have a few White students.

2 My Journey

I think it was a long series of events that led me to want to teach in a low-income community. In 10th grade I had a wonderful history teacher who opened my eyes to different ways of thinking. He used alternative textbooks and taught us that history has many points of view. We read stories about Columbus from the point of view of Native Americans and learned that consulting sources from different sides of historical issues was an important part of learning. That class really opened my eyes to think about the world using critical perspectives.

In my first year of college I read *A Small Place* by Jamaica Kincaid. Her writing was very jarring to me. She wrote about colonialism in a personal way. Throughout her book her narrative reads: And so you needn't let that slightly funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday. At first I was very offended. I thought: "That is ridiculous! I didn't oppress anyone! In fact, my own family was oppressed by others [I am Jewish]." But then it got me thinking about the sequence of events that led up to me being born in the United States in a time of prosperity for us and poverty for so many other nations. I decided that even though my family wasn't responsible for the oppression of Third World countries I still benefited from it because the United States did.

I then decided to study international development and economics in undergraduate school. I became very interested in international systems and the way the world works from the point of view of developing nations. I wanted to do some kind of aid work when I graduated from college.

Unfortunately I was unable to get a job with an aid group right out of college because many require you to work for free and I had to pay my student loans. I worked for a prestigious university for five years as a coordinator, and then I worked in a fundraising office. I figured fundraising would eventually get me into a non-profit organization that did good work overseas. It turned out that fundraising was not what I expected, and I really didn't like it. At the time I was thinking of leaving that job, I became engaged and my fiancé got a job offer in another state. We decided to relocate for his job, and it gave me a natural exit from the fundraising job that I disliked.

When we moved to our new city and state, I was planning my wedding and applying for jobs. I found myself interviewing half-heartedly, unsure of how I would pursue my goal of doing aid work. I made friends who were my age and also interested in bettering the world. I met a teacher who said she worked at a low-income school and asked if I would like to be a volunteer in her classroom while I job-searched. I thought this sounded great, and I went to her school (which happened to be Honor) the next week. I immediately fell in love with the school and the students. My friend was generous with her time and answered all the questions I had about her students, their home lives, the school's purpose, etc.

I volunteered weekly in her classroom from April until June of that year and saw what a wonderful impact my friend was having on the lives of her students and felt that as a volunteer I was making a small impact too. I came home with lots of stories about students for my fiancé. One day he said, "You know, I never mentioned this before but ever since I first met you I thought you should be a teacher." I was shocked. I had never thought about teaching and had always told him I wanted to work at a non-profit organization. He said he knew that but as a teacher I would be working much more directly with kids in a low-income community. "I think you should think about it. Talk to all your teacher friends, and your aunts who teach, and see what they say."

So I did. And every single one of my friends and relatives said they thought it made perfect sense for me to be a teacher and asked why I had not thought of it sooner. I also realized that many of my closest friends were teachers, or their moms were teachers, and that three of my aunts were teachers. Yet I had never thought of this career option before. I became very nervous about the idea of a total career change.

My fiancé encouraged me to look into local graduate programs just to see what was in our area. I found a Jesuit school that had a leaning toward social justice and went to an information session. I brought my undergraduate transcript and resume, and they told me that I would be accepted into their program immediately. I found an adviser who was extremely kind and helpful, and she helped me choose classes and enroll for the January semester. I continued to feel nervous about this career change, but my fiancé said, "Try it for the drop/add period, and if you don't like the classes, you are not locked into the program."

We had our wedding and went on our honeymoon, and when we got back I got a call from my friend at Honor. She said, "Honor is looking for in-house tutors, and since I know you don't have a job yet, I recommended you. Someone will be

calling you for an interview soon." I was excited at the idea of working part time in a school while starting my program so that I could get my feet wet as I learned about education. I got the job and loved it. I tutored students with special learning needs in all different subjects and grades. My graduate program started in January, and from the first week I knew that I was in the right place. I fast-tracked my program, did my student teaching at Honor, and completed my program in a year and a half while continuing to work as a tutor.

As soon as I graduated I started interviewing at Honor for open positions. I knew it was a very special school, and it was where I wanted to teach. I heard from friends who are my mentor teachers that if you find a school you like you should stick with it and work there however you can. It was a nerve-wracking few months of interviewing while I was still tutoring. Over the summer I got a spot as a long term substitute for a first grade teacher on maternity leave. I invited the principal to observe me and interviewed for a few other positions. I didn't get any of the positions I interviewed for and I was devastated. But when the first grade teacher decided not to come back to Honor when her leave was up in November, the principal hired me on the spot. I couldn't have been happier! I loved the school, I loved my students already, and I had my classroom set up, rules established, and routines going. I was in heaven. I knew that everything had happened for a reason and that I was meant to teach first grade at Honor.

3 My Teaching

Before I describe the particulars of my teaching, let me say a bit more about Honor, the students, and the community. Luckily at Honor we do not have a scripted curriculum, and I feel we have a balanced view of testing. But because most of our students speak English as a second language and 80 % of our students live in poverty, we face a number of challenges.

The make-up of my 50 first graders (two classes) included three who were labeled "emotionally disturbed," two who were reported to have been sexually abused, four who were recommended to receive high needs learning support, and a few who were on the cusp of needing learning support. Three were newcomers, one-quarter received English as a Second Language services, several were identified as gifted, one was described as having an anxiety disorder, and one was identified as mildly autistic. I also had many students who sought my attention and responded very positively to kind words and affection.

Most of my students have off-handedly or pointedly mentioned many things about their lives like substandard housing (rats, mice, cockroaches, bedbugs, lack of heating), homelessness, violence (getting beatings, seeing grown-ups fight, hearing gun shots), psychological issues (anxiety, depression, bonding issues with parents, time spent without adult supervision), and the cycle of poverty (parental lack of education, teen pregnancies, relatives in jail).

While many Honor families have complicated and difficult lives the community offers many positive supports. Some parents are involved with Honor events and groups; many do enrichment activities with their kids like taking them to the library, to cultural events, to the zoo or aquarium, and many church activities. A lot parents work on academic skills with their kids at home and assign them extra work. Most of my students are close to their grandparents, many of whom care for my students while their parents are working.

My overall mindset towards my work is joyful. Because I worked after college for five years in jobs I didn't particularly like or feel fulfilled in, and because I have worked in all sorts of menial jobs during summers in college and high school, working in a job that I really love is a joy for me every single day. Not only am I doing a job I love within a supportive work environment, but I am also doing work with great purpose. I knew that as a first year teacher I would have to try lots of things to see what worked for my students, but I was happy to take on the challenge! I feel I was meant to teach. Ever since that tenth grade history class, I knew I wanted to do something to help others in need. I pictured myself doing aid work in a developing country, but I feel that the work I am doing now is just as important. One of my primary philosophies about teaching is that it should be authentic. That is why I strive to understand my kids' lives as fully as I can. When I talk with them about daily life in our lessons and writing, or when I am answering a question, I want what I am saying to be relatable. For example, I am very careful to talk about their families as families rather than naming specific people. When I need something signed, I am careful to say, "Please bring this home and have it signed." I would never say: "Have your parents sign this" because I know many of my kids live with grandparents, aunts, guardians, etc. And when I give examples from my own life in my lessons, I use things that I know they can relate to like annoying siblings, doing chores, or my cat. It may sound picky, but in my experience kids have a great read on people, and decide who is trustworthy in a school environment based on these types of things.

I also believe in creating a positive and encouraging learning environment. This is another place where I try to be very careful with my language, and I ask my students to be careful with their language as well. Honor is just starting to adopt the Responsive Classroom social curriculum that I have received in-house trainings during Professional Development days. In my classroom we have been working on using follow-up questions all year and my kids have gotten pretty good at it. My students see me saying things like, "Tell me more about that," "Good idea," "Great thinking," "I see you are thinking about this in a different way," and they know that I value everyone's thinking and contribution to our class. I do not allow my students to speak to each other any differently. My kids will now say, "What do you mean?" or "Can you repeat that?" if they don't understand what another student is saying rather than rolling their eyes, laughing, or dismissing others' comments.

I also love using drama and improvisation in our morning meeting games and in presentations because I think it helps kids become comfortable with making mistakes and performing publicly. My kids impress me with wonderful acting, imagining, and presenting every day. It boosts their self-esteem and is especially great

for those students who have trouble in other areas but are great at being a ham for the class. One student, Amy, speaks Chinese as her first language and is very shy and often cries in class. Amy enjoys when we do improvisation. She laughs heartily and gets a sparkle in her eye as she acts out being a lion or a bus driver or a pencil. I participate in all these games and don't mind looking silly because my kids love it but also to show them that if I make a mistake it is not a big deal either. A third component of my teaching philosophy is maintaining high expectations. During my graduate program I did a lot of research on students in low-income communities because I knew I wanted to work with them. Study after study came to the conclusion that students of all kinds perform up to the standards that their teachers have for them. I remember one study in particular that broke students into categories like family income, mother's education, race, teacher experience, etc., and the only factor that made a difference in student performance was teacher expectations. I am very strict (more on that later), and my students know that I expect them to do their work and to do it to the best of their abilities. All of my students know what I expect of them and by and large they do it. Those students who receive special education and English as a Second Language services know that I know what their best work is and that I expect them to do it.

I talk about their futures when they are going to be in high school and college writing research papers and making poster presentations. At first, this seemed to surprise my first graders, but now they are used to it. Near the end of the year we had an open house to present what we knew about Spain to the other first grade class, and we created posters. When they completed them beautifully in two class periods when I wasn't sure they would really do so in four, I said, "Oh my gosh, look at these gorgeous posters! I cannot believe you finished them already. They look amazing! They look like the work of college students!" My kids were so proud; it was adorable. I am lucky that I teach a grade where it pays to be overly dramatic.

The fourth part of my teaching philosophy is structure. Anyone who has studied childhood development knows that children benefit from structure and consistency. It makes children feel safe and lowers anxiety and reduces behavior issues. That is why I insist on structure in my classroom. I have systems for everything: how to get a new pencil, the sharing of supplies, where different paper is located, how breakfast works, when and where to turn in homework, etc. I made sure that all of my systems were in place on the first day of school, and I explained and reinforced them often in the first weeks of school. I also made them logical and simple so that my kids would have success using them. I often have substitutes or visitors tell me my classroom runs itself and that my students all seem calm and confident using the systems. I am also consistent with my timing and language. I do my best to use the same timing and language every day for transitions and discipline—that way my kids know exactly what to expect. I also pride myself on being strict and fair with discipline. I am consistent, fair and follow through with warnings, time-outs and other consequences. I do not make a big deal out of things, but I do lower the tone of my voice and speak in a firm tone to show my students I mean what I say.

All students at Honor learn Mandarin Chinese. Classes are broken into Heritage (students who speak Chinese at home), who affiliate as Chinese-Americans and Non-Heritage groups (students who do not speak Chinese at home). All students also have specials in art, choir, music, and gym. Students in grades three through eight can take electives in Asian string instruments, African dance, Step, Indonesian club, Chess Club, and community service. Honor has partnerships with artists who come in for "residencies" that are a month or longer and they partner with a particular class to teach them artistic skills. The artists are storytellers, dancers, singers, sewers, and drummers.

I teach first and second grade reading, writing and social studies. I taught first grade this year, and I will loop up with my kids to second grade next year. We use the Teachers College Reading and Writing curriculum developed by Lucy Calkins (1994, 2000), for all of our English-Language Arts classes. I was sent to a week-long summer training at Columbia University by Honor and have attended one day per year every year after this initial training. My colleagues also gave all Honor teachers in-house trainings on things they learned when they went to TC trainings. In the reading and writing workshop the teacher teaches a 10-min mini-lesson. Students sit on the rug in rows, and I model a skill by using examples from my own reading or writing. After that I ask students to try out the skill highlighted in the lesson either as a group or by talking with a partner. If we are working in partnerships I then go around the rug and listen to my students talking, and then I share what I heard with the class. I then reiterate the skill we are practicing. Following this, I dismiss students to their seats to practice the skill they just learned. I have found that 10 min can be too long for my students so I try to keep my mini lesson to between 5 and 7 min.

The workshop model allows students to bring their own lives and experiences into the classroom. These are highly valued at Honor. I also think it is one of the reasons we have such great success with our students. The focus of the workshop model is authenticity. Students learn to read and write by reading and writing, and they are always encouraged to use examples, stories, and connections from their own lives. During the personal narratives unit students are asked to write about their daily lives. In the beginning of the unit I get a lot of great stories about birthday parties, Lunar New Year and other festive events. One challenge was when students said they "didn't have anything to write about" or that "nothing interesting happened" in their lives. I had to convince them through my teaching and conferencing that everything that happens in their lives is important. It also doesn't have to be happy or exciting. I gave an example of my sister being mean to me on the phone, and that led to a lot of students writing about fighting with their brothers and sisters. I gave an example of a boring weekend filled with chores, and that led to my students writing about helping their families with housework. After a while my kids got the idea and did not always write about the exact examples I gave them. Yet I sometimes wondered: *How could I get them to write deeper, more meaningfully about their lives and experiences?* This required continual modeling, coaxing and questions of each of my students. Some students took longer than others to open up about their lives, and some let it all hang out from the beginning.

It also helps if writing conferences are authentic and positive. When I conference with students, I like to let students know how their pieces affected me. When reading with a student, I might say, "Wow, I love how you read with expression" before highlighting something they can improve upon. When working on writing stories, I might say: "Great use of details, Oh dear—I can just see you falling down the steps!" Before I talk them through the writing point they are supposed to be incorporating in their story. My conferences are fast. Much faster than Lucy Calkins would like I am sure—but I like to get around to all of my students at least twice in a class period. This way I can check in on students who need a lot of extra help and give quick encouragement to those on the right track. I want my students to be writing for the vast majority of the class period with minimal interruptions from me. I do a class share at the end of each reading and writing lesson. I pick students to come up and share how they used the reading or writing point of the day, and I compliment them publicly. I am careful to choose different students to share each day balancing boys and girls, students who are learning English, students with special learning needs and exciting as well as "boring" topics.

In reading we make a lot of connections to their families and community. In our character unit, for example, students were instructed to think about the traits of a main character in a book they were reading and think of someone in their lives who is similar. This teaches students that their lives and the people they interact with are important. It is wonderful to listen to their connections or thoughts about their books and read their writing; I learn so much about them. We had several new students come to us in the spring, and I laughed to myself when they were shocked at how long they were expected to read and write for. One new student, Kevon, read through his books quickly and then packed them back into his reading folder and started looking around the room about 10 min into the period. I walked over to his table and said, "Kevon, we actually read for 20 min. You can re-read your books if you have already read them once…" Kevon's eyes grew bigger, and his mouth dropped open. He then took his books back out of his folder and started reading again. I told him he would get used to it and he did. Not only do we respect the knowledge that our students bring with them to school, we require them to use and talk about them every day. I feel lucky that I get to learn so much about my students lives by reading their writing every day.

Our students switch classrooms for different subjects. I teach reading and writing to all fifty first-grade students. My grade partner teaches math and science to all first graders, and we both teach social studies to our homerooms. I co-teach with the first grade ESL teacher. We plan units together, trade off teaching lessons, and she also pushes students into my classroom and pulls students out of my classroom for small group work. Working on the 2nd floor at Honor has been a very supportive experience. All of the K-2 teachers are upbeat, positive and helpful.

My ESL teacher and I started in the classroom at Honor the same school year and we are always called two peas in a pod. We think the same way and like to check in with each other multiple times a day about any number of issues and students rather than waiting for a scheduled meeting. We do have weekly meetings with the Special Education teacher where we plan units together and discuss

students. We also have another weekly meeting that includes other teachers to discuss students who need extra help. These meetings are essential for brainstorming, talking issues out and learning from each other about what to try with students who are having trouble. We know that my whole group lessons are not going to work for every student and that we will have to try lots of ways of reaching students who are having difficulty.

As I mentioned previously, Honor is starting to implement the Responsive Classroom model to teach social skills. Every morning students have breakfast (free because we are a Title I school), and then we have our morning meeting. We sit in a circle on the rug, greet each other around the circle, have a short sharing time, and then we play a game. These games are designed to build community and self esteem. Morning Meeting is a sacred part of the day for me because it signals the beginning of the official school day, and all students are greeted by name. At Honor, we feel it is important that all students hear their names at the beginning of the day so they know they are a valuable part of our school.

We also use Responsive Classroom to resolve big and small problems that come up in the classroom. Students are taught specific language and appropriate actions to use to deal with issues. For example, if I see two students arguing about something during independent work, I walk over to them and pull them to the side of the room. I will ask them what happened. One student might say, "He grabbed my eraser," and I will ask the other student why he did that. He might say, "Because she wouldn't share her eraser." I will then ask the second student, "Is there a better way you could try to share the eraser?" The student might say, "Yes, I could ask nicely." I ask the second student to try that strategy. I then supervise the students in the correct interaction, say thank you, and send them back to work. This takes about 2 min. As students become familiar with this routine, I often find that they do not have to be supervised to resolve issues. They are asked to work problems out themselves.

This method is also very effective for interpersonal issues like hurt feelings which sometimes surface in my class. About three quarters of the way through the year I realized that my students needed more vocabulary to talk about their feelings. We had a class meeting and talked about feelings, feeling words, and what hurt feelings could really mean (like feeling embarrassed or shy), and we made a chart and posted it. From then on my students were even more successful with the Responsive Classroom problem solving because they could use more specific words to describe the feelings they were having.

At Honor we also have a strict discipline program. Students in K-2 have a visual warning system, involving clips on a green, yellow or red string. Students are asked to take a break when they are doing something out of line with classroom expectations. They are to think about their behavior and return when they are ready to be part of the group. If a student does something repeatedly they move their clip from green to yellow, or yellow to red. Families then get a note about how their child did in school that day reflecting the color string their clip was one. We do have a Dean for more severe issues such as hurting another student or causing a major disruption

in the classroom. Each teacher explains the system to her students, states that it is non-negotiable, and goes over it many times in the beginning of school.

The vast majority of discipline is handled in the classroom. I like this system because I feel it empowers the teachers. The visual warning system empowers my kids because they can see a reminder of how they are doing during the day and work to make sure they do not move from green to yellow or yellow to red. I also allow students to “work their way back up” the system for minor issues. If a student displays improved behavior related to the issue they were having for more than a period, I will often let the student move their clip back up to the previous level. The students know that the teachers handle most of the discipline and that we mean business. My ESL partner teacher says I am “very old school for being so young,” and I agree. Classroom management is very important to me because I know my students need structure and boundaries to feel safe and be able to learn. I am strict, fair, and consistent, and I get very good results with our system. Our students are taught to follow classroom rules and directions, and take responsibility for their actions. They know that our rules are in place so that we can have a caring community: they are fair and they work.

I find this approach to be especially important for students who have difficulty adjusting socially and emotionally to the classroom. One of those students was Aurelio, the boy I described at the beginning of this chapter. His mother wanted him held back from second grade, and he was very upset about it. Aurelio had yelled at teachers and students throughout the school, called out and talked back daily, and refused to follow directions. Aurelio was infamous at Honor for behavior problems before he came to my class. I applied the same strategies with Aurelio that I used with all of my other students. I consulted often with the special education staff in our weekly meetings to be sure I was doing the right thing for him, and they gave me a lot of great advice. They would encourage me to remain consistent and firm. One special education teacher framed difficult behavior to me in an analogy. He said that if I went home and tried my key in my front door and it didn’t work I would not walk away and never try to get in my door again. I would try thy key in different ways, perhaps bang on the door, etc. He explained that students like Aurelio are used to getting results through their outrageous behavior and they will try different types of outrageousness and even behave more terribly to see if they can get results before giving into following the rules. Aurelio tested me for about a month to see if anything I did would change based on the level of “badness” he was displaying that day. I remained consistent. That worked surprisingly well. I adjusted the number of times I reminded Aurelio of things and sometimes had to explain why consequences were happening, but he got the same number of warnings as other students.

I also asked that his mother, who was his primary caretaker, help me with this plan at home. Aurelio’s mother preferred to communicate by email, and so I would email with her during the school day. For the first month I would let her know if Aurelio was coming home “on red” so she could prepare herself to follow through with consequences. She also emailed me if she had questions, and I would answer them in a friendly way. I knew that his mom was really on board when Aurelio

started saying, "My mom is going to kill me!" when he got to yellow or red. I am proud to say that Aurelio made a total turn around in my room. His behavior changed dramatically—so much so that the disciplinarian was surprised to learn that Aurelio was still attending our school late in the year because she had not seen him in her office until then. Aurelio became calmer, happier, more confident, and he performed better in school than ever before. He became a beloved part of our class. He brought me a big bouquet of flowers on the last day of school, and I almost cried.

One big challenge we face in literacy is that many of our students have not been to a Pre-K program. We have students who come to kindergarten looking as if they have never held a pencil or read a book. One student, Isadore, had little experience with school and difficulty acclimating to literacy routines in our class. Isadore (Izzy) is a native English speaker who has a complicated home life. His dad has a criminal record and so can only get certain jobs (i.e. shift work, night-work, odd jobs, etc.). Izzy has four siblings with two different moms, and there have been a lot of different women acting as caretakers over his school-life and that of his older brothers.

Izzy is prone to shut downs where he becomes totally uncommunicative. He received tutoring in phonics from one of our in-house tutors during our read-aloud period for all of Kindergarten and first grade and was making little progress in reading past a Kindergarten level. We tried many different interventions, even one-on-one tutoring. We also tried to get his family on the phone to talk to them about his situation, but to no avail. After several attempts, we were able to get Izzy's mother and father to come into talk to us. His mother revealed that she had had learning issues in school and she was concerned that her two kids might have them as well. She was afraid to come into talk to us because she thought we were going to "kick Izzy out of school." We explained that we would never do that but, and in addition, were legally required to give Izzy all the help he needed. Izzy's father insisted that his kids were all doing well in school and did not have any problems. We got Izzy's mom to sign a form allowing us to test Izzy to better understand his learning needs.

Izzy's older brothers heard that Izzy was being tested for a learning issue and began teasing him about "being dumb." I knew his brothers from my volunteering and student teaching days, and I tracked them down and told them to cut it out. We also talked about positive reinforcement with Izzy's mother. Once Izzy's mother felt a little more comfortable with us, she was open to having someone read with Izzy every night and work on a handwriting packet with him consistently. Those things in combination helped boost Izzy's confidence and abilities.

Another area of challenge is language. Many of our students are still learning English and most of their caregivers do not read English. Some caregivers who affiliate as Chinese do not know how to read Chinese. At times, I wondered if I could communicate effectively enough with this group of parents to help their children succeed in school. I was particularly puzzled about how to help one child named San. San came to our school from a private school. A report from that school indicated that he was an extremely difficult child and "unable to learn." We of

course thought this was ridiculous and set about trying to figure San out. San was practically a "newcomer," our word for students who speak no English at all, and I worked with my grade partner, my ESL teacher, the school psychologist, and the learning support staff to try to figure out what was going on with San. While he was obstinate much of the time, he also seemed to be very capable. San refused to follow rules and directions and was often adrift in his own thoughts.

We tried many different approaches with him, but the only thing that worked was pairing individualized attention and having him work on his own. We tried in vain to contact San's parents all year. Finally, San's father came to school for ESL night, and both San and his brother, Lan, alternated running around the school and acting out. I noticed that San's father did not interact with them at all. My ESL teacher was curious by this behavior and said that compared to how he acted with his dad, San performed amazingly well for us during the school day.

We learned through an interpreter that San's parents owned a store that the family lived above, and mom and dad worked there around the clock, leaving San and Lan alone upstairs. We finally understood what was going on; we were not only dealing with a language issue, but it appeared that the boys were not socialized to the behavioral expectations of school. We realized that trying to connect with San's parents about working with him at home was not going to work, so we concentrated on giving him and his brother as much structure during the school day as we could. We insisted that they follow classroom rules by walking them to and from the rug, by helping them open their folders and books, by taking them by the hand and placing them in the line, etc. By the end of the year San was finally sounding out words on his own, reading at the beginning first grade level, and initiating some writing on his own. We viewed these steps as major victories.

4 The Impact

I am excited to go to work every day. When my students come bounding through my door and greet me with a loud, "Good Morning!" I feel so proud of myself and thankful for the opportunity to do the work that I do. My overarching goals are to teach my kids to love learning and to value themselves. I think that those two things will make the biggest difference for my students. And that is why I am a teacher. I want to have a positive impact on my students and their families and communities. I want them to see a bright future for themselves and know that they can make a difference in their own lives.

The rewards that come with working with my students and their families are endless. I know that every day I am doing something positive for my students. I try my best to make them feel important and empowered and loved. I also strive to teach them social skills that they can use to navigate the world. Of course the Responsive Classroom curriculum is wonderful for teaching students conflict resolution, but I also branch out on my own sometimes. We had a class meeting towards the end of the year about understanding your true self. We talked about it in

the context of classmates saying things about each other that weren't true and students getting upset in response. My meeting point was that if someone says something about you that isn't true, you don't have to believe it. You know your true self and can think, "I won't worry about what that person said because I know it's not true." I casually mentioned that sometimes grown-ups might say something that isn't true about them (to which many kids nodded in agreement) and that they don't have to believe them either. They can know themselves and their own good qualities and draw strength from inside themselves. I brought the discussion back to our class, but I got a sense that that discussion was an important moment for some of my kids in issues outside our room.

All of the work that I am doing is made possible by a supportive administration and supportive colleagues. Teaching is an incredibly hard and exhausting job (even when done with joy). I stay until 6:00 pm every school day and plan my units and lessons on the weekends. I am expected to be many things to many students: caretaker, cheerleader, rule enforcer, problem solver, role model and psychologist. Being all of these things all day long to 54 important little people is a lot to ask of one person! But with the daily help of my colleagues and the genuine appreciation I feel from my principal I am able to do it.

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“I simply wanted to be part of something bigger than me.”

Megan L. MacTurk

Abstract Megan MacTurk taught fourth graders in an urban public school in Philadelphia. In college, she envisioned a career that would allow her to make a difference in the lives of others. This idea gained momentum as she traveled to some of the most underserved communities in the U.S. and examined educational inequalities while taking her first education course. After she earned a degree in elementary and special education, Megan brought equity perspectives to her classroom. She recalls instilling a positive, caring environment for learning in her classroom, setting high expectations for students’ academic work and behavior, supporting their diverse literacy abilities through guided reading and independent learning centers, and keeping careful track of their progress. Megan also describes how she managed the heavy emphasis on testing and scripted teaching in this school while also inviting her students to read and write about important local and global social issues.

Keywords Authentic caring · Guided reading · High expectations · Learning centers

1 Introduction

Jasmine is advanced for her age. Academics come easy to her. I’m relieved because she’s starting to slowly unravel, and her focus certainly is not on earning an “A” on her next writing assignment. She’s a leader who loves to help her classmates. She’s everyone’s friend. I can’t leave the room without her begging to come with me, and each day, her hug is strong with love. But, today, she is crushed. She has screamed, cried, and completely broken down several times. I know the reason. It’s not because somebody used her pencil without permission or because she forgot how to

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solve her multiplication problem. It's because she misses her mom. It's because they're about to celebrate her mom's birthday, holding on to the hope that she's still alive, or that somebody, anybody, will try to find her. All of the other students are at music class, but I'm holding this little girl as she melts in my arms. She's breaking my heart. With each tear, my frustration for her sudden emotional meltdowns and hysteria fades away; the reality of the situation is becoming more apparent.

I'm more than her teacher today, as I hold her and feel her warm tears sliding down my shoulder. I'm her constant adult, her mentor, her guide through life, and, most importantly, a mother figure. For her, a mother-like role model is bittersweet. I love her like a mother would love her daughter, but she's missing the love of her "real" mother. Her mother went missing exactly one year ago today, never to return home. Her boyfriend at the time was found dead and mutilated on the side of the road. Jasmine and her twin sister moved in with their older brother but were later moved to their aunt's after their brother's house got raided for drugs and he was arrested. Their older sister, who's named after their mother, was in the eighth grade at our school, but moved away after other students teased her about her mother being dead.

I just want to protect her from this extreme pain that I can't even begin to imagine. What if it were my mom who suddenly disappeared, and every sign led to death? What would I do if the woman who taught me to love and care for others, to live with a purpose, and showed me how to be strong, suddenly went missing? I literally stop myself because I feel tears starting to well in my eyes. I need to be strong, for her, for me.

I have been approached by people who say I'm lucky to be a teacher because I play with carefree little children all day, because I get two months off AND I even get paid during those months off! But I think I'm lucky to be a teacher because I experience the raw reality of the world each and every day. This is beyond the cubicle and 9–5 h that my friends often complain about. I could complain about her disruptions during my lessons or having to "deal" with her "home life." But, today, I feel lucky to be in her life. What I wouldn't do to trade in those two "paid" months off to give her a happy, pain-free childhood, where her biggest struggle is deciding which friend she wants to invite over for a slumber party. But, today, all I can do is hold her.

Situations like these are not uncommon in my school, and that is one of the reasons why I teach here. My students' resilience and strength comes from their experiences. They motivate me to be a better person each day. Our school is cradled between a large park–avoided due to violence, reported rapes, and attacks–and the rest of a high-poverty neighborhood. The enrollment in my school is 99 % African American, and every student qualifies for the free breakfast and lunch program. Many of our students' families receive government assistance. Our children are the students who receive the food from the can drives and the gloves, hats, and scarves donated from the charity programs at the suburban schools. This is the real world, and this is where I want to teach.

2 My Journey

I attribute a lot of my current passion towards educating children in high poverty areas to my education at Saint Joseph's University. I actually entered St. Joe's as an undecided business major; I really had no idea what I wanted to do. I knew I was meant to be in some type of leadership position, working closely with people, and doing something that made a difference. However, I hadn't yet realized that I was supposed to do all of those things as an educator. Within the first month of college, I knew business was not going to be my area of expertise. I thought about many different future career paths, including education, and I opted to major in elementary and special education. I still remember my first education class, which paved the road for me as an urban educator: Schools in Society.

While looking at colleges to attend, what attracted me to mine was its mantra: *Men and women with and for others*. The university I attended has an incredible passion for service, which can be seen through many of the programs and extra-curricular activities that are offered there. Before attending college, I was very involved in musical extra-curricular activities; my one regret was not having enough time in high school to explore volunteering options. I remember talking with my mom about wanting to do something with my life where each day I knew I was making a difference. I wanted to give back, but not out of pity or vanity; I simply wanted to be a part of something bigger than me.

I took part in many service-related activities while at college, not all of them education-related. I went on various service trips throughout the country, including to the Appalachia region, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. Service was a huge part of my experience and growth while at college. What moved me most during these experiences was seeing the injustices in the world, especially those connected with race. I took courses that focused on the issue of race and inequality in America. My passion was ignited, and there was no doubt in my mind that I had to be doing something in my life where I got the same sense of connection to others and motivation to bring justice to our systems as I did in my courses and other service experiences.

As a freshman in college, Schools in Society provided me with a humbling dose of reality. A product of the public school system, I had a relatively positive outlook on public education. I grew up in a low-middle class to middle-class area. There wasn't much diversity in our schools, but there was a mixture of children from both blue-collar and white-collar families. Some families lived in small apartments, others in large single-family homes; some kids shopped at Kmart, others at Abercrombie & Fitch. I would like to think that I was somewhere in the middle. I have a very loving family, but it's not without its flaws. I was always well cared for and surrounded by people who loved and supported me. However, my parents split up when I was young, and I had to grow up pretty quickly to overcome some family issues.

My mother is a strong woman, and she worked hard to provide for me and give me a happy life. My grandparents couldn't be more supportive; they would come to

every single activity I was ever involved in throughout my life. As an adult, I attribute most of my success to my family. They were the cornerstone to my education and drive to live with a purpose. Even though my school was fairly competitive, my school district still had to face issues with drugs and other challenges often confronting public education systems. I realize now that I was simply lucky enough to have been born into a family that had the resources to provide for me, put me in a school system that would prepare me for the future, and push me to be my best. But what would have happened to me if I had been born several miles away and raised in some of the poorest areas in New Jersey? What if my family could not have provided for me enough to put me in a decent school system?

While reading Jonathan Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation* and *Savage Inequalities*, my motivation to bring justice to racial inequalities quickly turned into a passion to be a part of closing the achievement gap between White and Black students. This became very clear to me as Kozol explained the differences between the public schools in two areas very close to where I grew up: Cherry Hill, NJ, an almost exclusively white, upper-middle class area, and the schools five minutes away in Camden, NJ, a low socio-economic area plagued with one of the highest rates of violence in the country, where the residents are mostly Black or Hispanic. I became enraged as I read about the privileges given to the students in Cherry Hill's schools, while the students only a few miles away in Camden rarely even had working fire alarms. It was as if nobody cared about their lives, let alone a decent education. It was a matter of race and inequality; children lucky enough to be born on one side of the county line received one of the best educations available in New Jersey, while the rest were left to fend for themselves in unsafe schools. I quickly saw these same problems in the Philadelphia public school system during my observations and field experiences.

The students of upper middle-class Cherry Hill thrive in schools with the most up-to-date technology, while the neighboring poor and crime-stricken city of Camden can barely afford fire alarms and toilet paper. How was this fair? How could this happen? Who was doing something about this? The fire in me had been ignited, and I knew urban public education was my passion.

I didn't think I was saving the world or being a better person because I didn't want to teach in the suburbs. I simply saw a situation that I didn't feel was right, and I was passionate about helping to solve it. I wanted to focus on public education because, as a product of public education (albeit, a very different public education experience than my future students would be receiving), I believed that every child, regardless of ethnicity, economic background, or other factors, deserves an excellent public education that sets him or her up for a successful life. When I told my family that I wanted to teach in an urban school district, nobody was excited for me. My family members who are teachers and assistant principals in South Jersey suburbs begged me to reconsider, reminding me at every turn that I would surely be miserable and that I would be receiving little to no support from the administration. But I knew that I was doing something I was passionate about.

While small nonprofit organizations and charities undoubtedly make a difference in this world, I always believed in going directly to the root of a problem in order to

start making the necessary changes for improvement. I knew, for me, that place was the classroom. I wanted to be the one providing a stellar education to my students. I knew I couldn't save the world, nor did I plan to do so after graduating. I just wanted to face the reality of the crisis at hand in order to truly understand where we went wrong and how quality education can help to break the vicious cycle of poverty in our country. Why were these children being denied something that is not only necessary for survival in today's world but that also could propel our society into being a better place? What would happen to society if each child were given an equal and stellar education? What possibilities could be unlocked for our future generations? I wanted to be the one to offer that to somebody, to give him or her a chance to make a difference.

3 My Teaching

My work is my life; in fact, I describe it more as a lifestyle instead of just a career. If you ask those who are close to me, they will tell you that it doesn't take long for me turn any conversation into one about the current state of public education in the country, and even more specifically in Philadelphia's public schools. Education is a passion of mine, and even more so, bringing justice to those who have felt the sting of inequality in education. However, I always knew that I had a different passion for educating children than some of my peers in college.

As an education major in a small school, you tend to take most of your classes with the same people, and you form many friendships with those people as you bond over common drives. I feel lucky to have made so many friends who share similar passions in education, but I always knew I didn't quite fit in with the majority of the other education majors. A lot of my peers truly love children, and they had always known they wanted to be a teacher. They worked at summer camps and after-school sport programs; they had jobs at day care centers; and they often spoke of how much they just loved little kids. Don't get me wrong; kids have a very special place in my heart, but I volunteered once at a summer camp, and let's just say, it wasn't the highlight of my summer. I babysat many children, but would quickly become bored with hide-and-go-seek and pushing swings. Clearly, I believe that summer camps (or some type of continuation of fun activities to get kids off the couch) and physical exercise are fundamental for development and happiness. But it just wasn't for me. I became worried that maybe I wasn't in the right field as I listened to almost all of my peers describe how much they "just loved kids."

I soon realized that I didn't have to have the exact same bond with children as a lot of my peers. Instead of running around aimlessly in the backyard with the kids I babysat, I had more fun with them when I was turning daily activities into educational experiences. Turning arts and crafts time into a chance to teach a preschooler how to write his name brought me happiness. I bring that same passion for educating children to my classroom each day.

I believe that ALL children deserve an amazing education, regardless of economic status, location, ethnicity, etc. However, I am not naïve to the difficulties that are placed on our children from low socio-economic areas. When you tell people that you work in an urban school, you get a plethora of reactions: racist, ignorant reactions, sad reactions filled with pity, and reactions that make you feel like you are worthy of being called Mother Theresa. Interestingly enough, I don't feel that way about my work. As a White woman, there was much I had to learn about my students, whose life experiences and culture are very different from my own. I struggled internally with this picture because our schools were struggling. Children were getting into fights with one another on a daily basis. Learning wasn't happening and each day they fell further and further behind. I believed racism had much to do with this picture.

I became very comfortable early on with having conversations with my students about race, social justice, etc. This was only possible because I have always built strong relationships based on trust with my students and I ensured my class was a safe space. I wanted these conversations to be completely honest and transparent; therefore, I was honest about my identity as a White woman and spoke about it openly. This may seem silly because it's pretty obvious when you see me that I am a White woman. But race is still a taboo topic and I began to realize that my students' limited experiences with White people were mostly negative ones. They struggled with how to be honest about their feelings about White people with me in the room (they NEVER wanted to hurt my feelings or be mean to me). The word "White" was so loaded with negative experiences for my students that it was on par with a cuss word. I remember one time, while teaching a lesson on slavery, a student asked, "Why did White people treat so many Black people like animals?" Another student, gasped and said, "You can't say 'White!' It was then that the weight of race truly hit me. So I had to reassure my kids that it was okay, because I know that, as a White person, there is still a lot of racism in the world and I'm not proud that people who look like me have spent centuries hurting people who looked like them.

I always have to give my all in whatever I am doing. So, during the school year (and even some of the summer), I am completely dedicated to my students and their education. In order to provide students with a stellar education, I will try to "pull out all the stops." For example, I will often meet students before or after school to work one-on-one in order to improve weaker skills. Being at school from 7 a.m. until 5 p.m., working with students almost non-stop, can be exhausting at times. But nothing compares to the pride I feel for my students when I see the happiness they experience once they can finally read at grade level, or solve the long multiplication problem without help. I have also had students and parents call me if their child needs help with homework problems. Sure, it may not seem conventional for most teachers; in fact, it is unheard of amongst teachers to pause during their dinner to talk with a student. But I am relieved when a student calls for help with an assignment because, to me, that shows their dedication and their parents' dedication to their education.

My peers who taught in some of the "most desired" suburban schools would often complain about the "helicopter parents," constant scrutiny from families, and

the overbearing pressure to give into moms who were unhappy with a child's "C" grade on an assignment (even if that grade was earned). After complaining about the over-involvement of the parents in their schools, they would often remark how "nice" it must be that, because I taught in low-income areas, to have little to no parent involvement. Their ignorant assumptions, however, wouldn't have been further from the truth. Despite having several jobs and a lack of transportation options, my students' families are dedicated to ensuring that their children receive an excellent education. It's not uncommon to spend hours on the phone with parents discussing ways to improve their children's reading levels while they're not in school, strategies to increase math vocabulary, and even though it probably meant taking more overtime shifts at work, options for extra tutoring in the summers and on weekends. The grit my students display each day clearly comes from a lifetime of watching their families overcoming obstacles and supporting one another.

While at Saint Joseph's University, I spent many hours throughout several courses, including a graduate-level course, on learning the ins-and-outs of language development and how to best teach literacy skills to kids of all ages, ranges and with an array of needs. However, despite the large amount of time I spent studying the subject, nothing could have prepared me for the diverse literacy needs of my students. How was I supposed to apply skills meant for decoding words and sounds for a kindergartener to nearly my entire fourth-grade class, while also teaching the curriculum and preparing my students for the state standardized tests? As a new teacher, I had a lot to learn and not a lot of time to help my students.

I believe that all children can learn, but not all children learn the same ways. I bring this belief to life through my literacy lessons and assessments. My literacy block focuses mostly on small-group lessons and one-on-one assessments. This is particularly useful because I have students with an array of literacy needs in my class, and many do not read according to grade-level expectations. But that doesn't mean that they can't do well in literacy. Most students I have taught have a hunger for reading, and desire to learn the skills necessary to read books at their level. They may have just not been taught properly, and in a few cases, there were undetected learning issues. However, I also have a number of children in my classes reading directly on grade level or even a year or two above. There is no one-size-fits-all in education, particularly in something as complex as literacy.

I was clearly in over my head, and knew that it would take years for me to figure out the best methods for helping my students increase their reading levels so that they would finally be performing at or above grade-level in reading. What I eventually settled on during my first year of teaching was a basic literacy teaching sequence that included three major components:

- **Mini lesson**: a whole group activity where I teach a literacy strategy, such as determining the main idea or how to search for cause and effect clues.
- **Shared reading**: a whole group activity where I model or "think aloud" how to practice the strategy while reading a portion of a text. Students have copies of

the same text, allowing them to follow along as I model. They also practice using the new strategy with a partner.
- **Guided reading**: a small group activity that allows me to target instruction to to students' specific reading needs.

In my classroom, Guided Reading was known as "Book Club." To get to where I felt come degree of control over this practice, I researched educational blogs on best practices for guided reading, searched for lesson plans for leveled books, and read articles and texts about overcoming the learning barriers for children in low-income areas. It took several professional development sessions and a lot of research before I fully understood and could properly use guided reading in my classroom. For me, it all starts with systems. Students learn how to use their stations during Book Club, the expectations, and how to complete their work during Book Club at the very beginning of the year. Since I teach fourth grade, I focus less on "crafty" stations or games, and more time is spent reading from books.

During Book Club, students are placed into small groups often according to their reading performance, but this changes so that students do not become stigmatized as being in a certain group. (I also name my groups after continents to help students learn geography.) I use a series of formal and informal assessments, such as reading inventories and interviews at the start of the year to determine reading levels. Each group completes one activity, or station, during Book Club, which lasts up to 40 min per day. The stations are: Meeting #1 and Meeting #2, Independent Daily Reading, Listening Center, and Word Study.

I meet with two groups per day, Meetings #1 and #2. During my meetings, I teach the skill we are working on that day or a skill the students in that group have been struggling with. I use leveled books during these meetings according to the instructional reading levels of the group. Our school has large series of leveled books. I always use chapter books so that my fourth-graders become more comfortable with reading appropriately leveled books. Each student has a book bin, where he or she keeps a Reading Binder, which houses handouts and places to record responses to reading tasks and their Book Club books. Students bring their book bins to the meeting, where we use the book in our lesson. After the lesson, I give the students an independent activity to complete. For example, they should read the next chapter, then make a Venn diagram in the response section of their binders to compare and contrast two characters. While they are completing that, I listen to each student read aloud to me, one-on-one.

While students read aloud, I use Reading A-Z to assess their progress. I made a smaller copy of the pages, which describe each level and explain strategies the reader is using in each level. I laminate each page and place it on a metal ring so it is easier to use. As I listen to students read, I record the strategies they are using on a premade label. I make a template for blank labels to record the date, student's name, book title, book level, strategies used (according to Reading A-Z), and reading level. I have a large binder where I keep all of my students' literacy assessments (standardized test scores, literacy quizzes, work samples, etc.). Each student has his or her own section. In each section I keep a piece of cardstock where I place the

label once I am finished recording information. This is a great way for me to track students’ progress during my observations.

While I am leading my meetings, the other groups are working at the listening center, completing a word study activity, or reading independently. At the listening center, students listen to a recorded copy of a book slightly higher than their reading instructional level. While following along in their copy of the book, students complete an activity where they practice the skill we have been learning for that day.

Word study focuses on finding patterns in words and increasing vocabulary. I use several premade centers that I purchased using money allotted to us in the school budget and centers given to us by the instructional facilitator at our school. While two or three students from the group use these centers on the carpet, two more students use the two computers in our room to practice word study. Last year, my school purchased a program called Study Island, and we are required to have students using the program every day. Study Island allows the students to sign into their own profiles, take a pre-test to assess which reading skills they need to improve, then play educational computer games to work on those skills. Teachers can look at student profiles to see if their reading skills are improving. Students love Study Island because they believe they are simply playing a computer game, but they are actually improving important reading skills. Finally, the last group is completing Independent Daily Reading. The students in this group take their book bins to their seats and complete a reading task. I review the task prior to starting Book Club, and the task is also written on the Smart Board. Without a doubt, the most difficult part of this is keeping students focused and on task while I am with a small group.

Using this system, I am able to truly assess and focus on the growth of my students. Teaching each small group, I am able to emphasize the areas where my students need improvement. The one-on-one time I have with each student is essential. I always have conversations with all the students after they read to me about which strategies they used well, how they improved, which strategies they should be using more, and in what areas they still need to work. Knowledge is power, and my students perform better and improve more rapidly when they know exactly where their strengths and areas for improvement are. Using my assessment binder, I can keep track and chart my students’ progress with their literacy skills. I use a lot of data from formal assessments to gear my lessons, but then I use the informal assessment to individualize each lesson. I am still learning how to keep students focused and optimize my time during Guided Reading, but I have already begun seeing improvement in them.

Systems, systems, systems. This is my mantra. I strongly believe that classroom management should be extremely proactive, and this can be achieved through systems. I balance out these systems with building strong relationships with my students. My students know that I care very deeply for them and have set high expectations for them. We build a strong foundation of trust, which helps support the many procedures I have in place for my students. Consistency is key: when

students know what to expect from the moment they walk into the classroom, they will almost automatically feel secure in their surroundings.

I begin each year with getting to know my students. I incorporate the teamwork theme in my classroom, letting them know that the only way we will all succeed is if we work together. I refer to my class as Team, instead of Room 206. I believe that the more you get to know somebody and begin to share your similarities, bonds will be formed, which helps build the sense of team within the classroom. Within the first few days of school, we do a lot of getting-to-know you and team-building activities to immediately begin forming those bonds. For example, I will conduct a lesson on teamwork and what defines teamwork. We discuss times when we work as teams, such as playing a sport. Then, we give examples of times when teamwork is important in school. Students then get a piece of construction paper and craft supplies. They finish the following sentence: "Teamwork is…." Then they decorate each piece of paper, and we put all of the pieces of paper together to make a Teamwork Quilt. Students love to see the final product and are amazed at how great the quilt looks with all of their tiles put together. I then gear a class discussion about how, when all of our teamwork tiles are put together, we make a beautiful finished product. If one piece of the quilt is missing, it will change the end product.

I quickly realized during my first year of teaching that my students were in need of more positive social interaction skills. This past year I began working on forming those skills in the first week of school. I also get to know my students by having them and their parents complete interviews and interest inventories. This allows me to get to know what the students like, dislike, and what their goals are, while also getting to see how the parents view their children and their goals for the school year. I also set up lunch dates with small groups so that we can get to know each other better.

I attribute a lot of my classroom management success to the strong relationships I build with my students but also to the systems I have put in place for my classroom. I had about a week to prepare for my first year of teaching. I came in with a few procedures, but I mostly formed them as I got to know what worked for my class. Last summer, however, I was determined to be much more prepared. I reflected on what worked and which systems needed improvement. I read several books, including *The First Days of School* (Wong and Wong 2001), and read online blogs of teachers who I feel had similar teaching styles to mine. Pulling all of this together, I came up with an entire handbook that outlines almost every procedure you could think of needing in a classroom: the Team Guidebook. All of my procedures are outlined in this handbook. All the students get a copy of the book at the beginning of the year; they must go through this handbook with their parents and sign a contract stating that they understand and will abide by the systems in place (the parents must sign a similar contract stating that they will support their child in following the handbook and that they understand the systems in place).

We then spend the first several weeks going through the handbook and practicing each system. My students know exactly what to expect from me, and they know each procedure. I run my classroom on respect and responsibility. Each child

is held accountable for his or her actions. If children are disagreeing, I immediately meet with them on how to resolve the problem. My students know that even if they have done something wrong, I will respect them if they are honest with me. I make it a strong point to teach my students that they make choices, and those choices result in consequences; whether it is a positive or negative consequence is up to them. For example, if a child fails to follow a team norm or class rule, I tell him or her, "You have chosen to earn a verbal warning." I never "give" verbal warnings. Using this dialogue makes it very clear that students make choices and earn various things as a result.

Students always get a second chance in my room. I focus on working with them on how to learn from a mistake. Discipline should be a time for learning and growth, not embarrassment and scolding. I make it very clear to my students when I am disappointed in them, and they do not like that one bit (it always goes back to respect). But they always learn the consequences of their actions, not only for themselves but how their choices impact others. For example, if a student chooses to chew gum in class (this is against school rules), he or she earns an immediate detention. However, this is not the typical detention. First, we discuss why students should not be chewing gum in the classroom (they always give great answers!), particularly that gum can be placed on school furniture, and then the janitors are left to clean up after them. We discuss how it is not a janitor's job to clean up after them and that we must all contribute to keeping our school a clean space. Then I walk the students to the seventh and eighth grade classrooms, where students have discovered the sneaky trick of putting their gum under the desks. Each student has a pair of rubber gloves and a ruler, and they spend half an hour scraping gum off desks. This may seem unusual; however, my students understand how it feels to have to clean up after somebody else who chose not to follow directions.

In fact, parents have been extremely supportive of my method of "teaching" discipline. The proof that it works is not in words; it is in the students' reactions. After they clean the middle school rooms, we talk about their choices and how they affect others. After this, they not only refrain from chewing gum in class, they remind others that they should not be chewing gum, and they show greater respect for the janitors and their surroundings. While I have apparently developed a reputation as being a stern teacher at my school, my students know that it is out of love and care. Despite this reputation, I continuously have little third graders asking me if they can be in my class the next year.

So many of my students have had to or are currently overcoming major challenges in their lives. Some came from abusive homes, are in foster care, are homeless, have parents in jail or are dead. Some spend a lot of time on the streets, and they see and witness what most children in America will never have to experience. Most of my children, despite only being only 9 and 10 years-old, fend for themselves on a daily basis. They know how to wake themselves and get ready for school and then get their younger siblings ready for school. They know about violence and loss. They know that life is unfair and nothing is permanent. The pressure of trying to catch my students up so they have a fair chance in life, while knowing the societal pressure placed on them to become a stereotype or a statistic,

causes a great deal of anxiety for me. I have had to remind myself many times that my students are still young, despite all that they have experienced in their short lives. They don't need me to remind them of the unfair cards they've been dealt; they deal with that reality everyday. They need me to give them the tools necessary to surpass expectations so that they can build a better life to themselves.

While high-stakes testing certainly has its place in education, in my school, it determines almost every second of classroom time. The administration at my school requires daily practice with open-ended questions, where we teach only strategies on how to structure a response, not teach the skills needed for students to understand what they are being asked to do. Our principal believes it could be accomplished as a 10-minute exercise. However, with having to read an entire new story, construct an outline, and write a final draft, this takes nearly the entire lesson time. We are required to submit examples of student responses each day, grade every student's response every day, and chart the grades. This takes time away from actually teaching the skills students need to learn.

The biggest challenge with high-stakes testing is that these requirements stifle teacher creativity and have become so time-consuming that students have begun to feel as though they are only in school for the PSSA, Pennsylvania's standardized test. So much of our daily lessons have become scripted because of testing-related mandates. As a teacher, it is my job to provide invigorating and intensive lessons from which my students master important skills. However, the requirements placed on us have taken away the creativity and now fill a one-size-fits-all mold. This becomes incredibly infuriating when you know that your children are not learning at the rate they could be and are not improving where it matters.

This structure has turned into an entirely different monster as schools continue to lose money, are closed, and teachers and administrators are losing their jobs. But it seems as though everyone has lost sight of why we are truly here: to educate. Maybe it is because I was not a strong test-taker when I was younger, or knowing that I learn better through experience, rather than simply reading and answering questions, but I strongly believe that we are holding our children back from the education that they deserve. Testing does provide great data on standards mastery, weak areas, and analyzing student performance. However, this past year, my students took almost ten standardized tests. Some tests took up to three days to complete. That is a large amount of precious time our children should be spending learning in a stimulating environment rather than coloring in bubbles on a paper.

During my first year of teaching, I was not prepared for the huge effects of high-stakes testing in my classroom. I simply followed the requirements and tried to keep my head above water. However, this past year I followed a slightly different approach: do what's best for my students. Now that doesn't mean I refused to follow requirements and go completely against the grain. Instead, I spent the time working on developing the important skills my students needed to learn, as opposed to having my students frantically write the same incorrect responses day-in and day-out because my principal required it. I try to incorporate the requirements, such as a daily open-ended constructed response, as a way of having my students

practice the skills they actually need. For example, I started having students answer a quick question about a story we had read previously. This way, students did not need to reread an entirely new story, and they were able to practice skills already learned. During this time, I attempted to visit several students and give them one-on-one advice on how to improve their writing. I turned in student work samples and showed proof that I was working rigorously with my students.

I have to admit that this is an area in which I am attempting to improve. I refuse to let my classroom turn into a boring, underwhelming environment where students feel as though one test determines their entire educational existence. I will teach my students according to what I know works best for them; anything else would be a failure to do my job. The most important thing is that I know I'm on the right track. We have students take the Gates-MacGinitie test twice a year, in September and in May. This test analyzes students' growth in vocabulary and comprehension. We also administer the WRAP test multiple times throughout the year. Students read out loud to the teacher as the teacher marks mistakes and self-corrections made by the student. The teacher then asks comprehension questions about the text. Using this data and observations made during guided reading, the teacher then determines students' reading levels. On average, most of my students improved their reading levels about one grade level (i.e. from a 4.0 grade level at the start of the year, to a 5.0 grade level at the end of the year). However, many of the students begin the school year at least one reading level below average. For example, during this last school year I taught fifth-grade. Many students were starting their fifth-grade year reading at a 4.0 grade level. Therefore, most of those students are going into sixth-grade reading at a 5.0 grade level.

My students seem to have similar results in their writing as they do reading. Writing samples are graded according to the Pennsylvania Writing Scoring Rubric. Each sample is given a score from 1 to 4 on Focus, Content, Organization, Style, and Conventions, with 20 being the highest possible score. Most students were at least one, if not two or more, years below grade level. Students often arrive to the fourth or fifth grade making many simple spelling and mechanical errors that are often found in average second grade writing. On average, students often improve from scoring an 11/20 on the PA Writing Rubric at the start of the year to scoring a 16/20 at the end of the year.

What these test results do not measure is my students' capacity to love and care. Without a doubt, my students are loyal to loved ones. My students will stand behind their family and friends at all times and love to care for younger family members. They love unconditionally and would give the shirt off of their backs for a loved one.

Children not only learn better when skills are taught using the knowledge and experiences they bring to the classroom, but they learn how to apply these skills on a regular basis. I try to incorporate their daily life in most lessons: my students are more intrigued and they also learn how to use important skills. For example, I use their names and daily experiences in my math lessons. When writing word problems, I always use students' names and particular situations, like going shopping at

the corner store. For example, when learning how to subtract using decimals, I will use word problems describing a student going to the store with a specific amount of money, explain how that student purchased an item, and ask students to figure out the difference. Students feel a connection to the lesson, but most importantly, they see how they use the skill each day.

I almost always try to incorporate social justice issues into lessons. My students are very astute about injustices in the world, and they have very strong opinions about them. For example, before studying the water cycle, we learned about the amount of drinkable water in the world. Then we examined the water crises in Africa, we watched a video about Jay-Z, a popular hip-hop artist, who visited parts of Africa and met children who are affected by the water crisis. My students couldn't believe their eyes. We extended the lesson into coming up with ways to address the water crisis.

When teaching the writing process, I allow students to express opinions. I may give them a prompt that has to do with some type of injustice or inequality and ask them to respond to it. We go through the steps of the writing process as we write. But my students get a chance to bring personal experience and feelings about blatant inequality into their writing. I always tell my students that they have excellent and valid opinions that people need to hear, but before people will take them seriously, they need to learn how to express themselves in conventional writing.

4 The Impact

I didn't decide to work in urban education because I wanted to change the world, but the rewards feel almost as great as that. Each day, I know that I'm making a difference. To be able to directly impact someone's life on a daily basis is priceless.

I get tremendous satisfaction from knowing that I am helping give my students the key to a successful future, or at least the motivation to be their best. Substandard education for urban children is very much a part of the brutal cycle of poverty in America. I am not claiming to know what is absolutely best for all of my children, but I hope that I can impact them enough to at least give them the option to move forward in their education and have a future that does not include poverty. Most of my children do not consider college even as an option in the future. To see their reaction and the surge of excitement when I tell them that they are more than intelligent enough to go to college, and that I simply believe in them, is incredible.

I don't feel pity for my students; even though I feel pain when I think about some of the unfortunate circumstances some of them are living through. I don't believe I am a saint for "putting up with those kids." I am where I'm supposed to be. If anything, I feel like the lucky one because I live the reality of society and how we are coping with our history each day. I don't live in my own 9–5 bubble, never needing to pay much mind to the rest of the world. Each day, I am reminded of how blessed

I am to have been born into a family where I had the opportunity to live a successful life. Each day, I am motivated to be a better person by being with my children, who must overcome great odds just to defeat stereotypes and the low expectations placed on them. I couldn't imagine working with a different community.

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“Everyday is a new chance to get it right.”

Tracie L. Sanlin

Abstract Tracie Sanlin taught eighth graders history and physical science at a middle school on the West Coast. Tracie descends from a long line of African American educators, and understands the significance of her elders’ contributions to their communities. By comparing her own enriched schooling experiences with the lower-quality schools that are afforded to many students of color in underserved communities, Tracie wanted to address educational inequality through work as a teacher. A Teach for America corps member, Tracie understood that she needed to immerse herself in learning how to develop her students’ literacy abilities. She focused on writing instruction and deep reading to create socially aware world citizens. She brought critical perspectives to her history class by having her students inquire about the acquisition of land from the perspectives of indigenous people. Tracie also described building trusting relationships with her students’ caregivers.

Keywords Critical literacy · Eighth-grade history and physical science · TFA

1 Introduction

It was the last day of school before break, and while I loved my students, they were testing and pushing me in ways I hadn’t seen in a very long time. I know, teachers aren’t supposed to have favorites, but there were two who displayed a special wit and sense of playfulness. Since we shared many a joke before class began, we had even formed burgeoning relationships that elicited acceptable behavior from them more often than not.

On December 23rd, after the last class of the day, two separate events occurred that will never leave me. We had an early dismissal that day, and Amaro—my movie star and comedian—gave me three big hugs. At just over four feet in the

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eighth grade, he was a little guy. He compensated for his height with a wicked sense of humor and by engaging in severe off-task behavior. I remember one time in class he hid in front of my LCD projector and gave a puppet show with his hands and a soundtrack that would not be considered appropriate under the best of circumstances. Considering all that we had been through, this hugging was a rare show of vulnerability from Amaro. I consented to the hugs, and then Amaro asked, "Can I take a picture to remember you?" I said "No! Come back in two weeks, and you can see me then." He said that he was going to miss causing me trouble and bringing me laughter. "Thanks, Amaro. I'm going to miss you too, kid!" I didn't realize at that time the significance of what he had just done.

I didn't really understand until that point what coming to school really meant for Amaro. Indeed, what it meant for all of my students. This story doesn't end here. What happened at the end of the day is really why this particular event will probably never leave me. With half of their eighth grade year completed, Amaro and Edwin came barreling back into my classroom having skipped out on their last class of the day. They were so enthusiastic that they almost barreled me over with their good-byes. Hugs and promises made and completed, they pulled away. Edwin said to me, "Miss, you're still going to be a teacher when I come back, right?" I replied, "Of course, Edwin." With that he nodded and seemed satisfied with my answer. The boys ran off, doing whatever they do when they weren't causing me trouble.

After they left, I broke down in tears. What teachers had these kids had that they needed to confirm that I'd be there when they came back? How are we upholding the promises we made about education in our nation? We live in a country that put generations of work into making sure that every child has the privilege of an education. When Horace Mann started the first American public schools, he wanted them to be free and open to all. Yet today many children in high poverty communities continue to receive a substandard education. Children who are also of color are especially vulnerable to poor quality schooling. How is this acceptable?

My students have firsthand experience with the faults of our education system. With a bit of reflection, it becomes one of the more upsetting realities of our lives. With that said, I can't blame my students for their assumptions that their teachers will leave them. In my experience, the teacher turnover rate at the schools where I have worked is obscene. Many times teachers would be there on Friday but would never return the following Monday. My students had a never-ending series of substitutes who didn't know what to teach or how to teach, and many just didn't care.

So it's not surprising that on the last day of school before winter break, Amaro and Edwin were determined to confirm that I was going to be there. I know and believe that Amaro, Edwin, and all of my students deserve to have teachers that will be there every day and will return after every break. They deserve to have educators that are skilled, proficient, and dedicated to their work. We've made promises to these students and their parents about what education can do for them in the United States. With those promises already made, we have an obligation to uphold and fulfill them. My understanding of these moments brought me into teaching, and my experiences with those moments keep me teaching.

I realized how much my students needed highly proficient teachers, but I was just beginning to learn how to be one. After surviving my first four months of teaching I had made it to my first holiday break. I was exultant. My students' first test scores had just come in. Some of my children had learned—many didn't—but I was relieved that I had persisted. I remember looking at their first periodic assessment scores and realizing that I hadn't done my job. I knew that many of my students in my seventh and eighth grade block hadn't learned much of anything during my first four months of teaching. I felt as if I wasn't fit to do this work and that one of my only accomplishments was that I showed up to teach every day as best prepared as I knew how. I felt that I had failed.

It was time to regroup. What could I have done differently to garner a better outcome? How did my actions and mindsets influence my lack of success? How could I get the help you needed to get better as a teacher? To get help I leaned on my network, and I used every resource that was available to me. I humbled myself to ask for help and to accept whatever thoughts, resources or advice I could use. I was lucky to be at a school that had a strong mentorship program for 1st and 2nd year teachers and they helped me learn that what I experienced was not unusual and I could recover from my failure. Those professional mentoring relationships were so instrumental in my future success. Years later I still lean on both of my mentors from that first year of teaching today. I spoke to my fellow young teacher colleagues and asked what they were doing to experience success. I also had to learn how to discern which pieces of advice were the most salient to my own practice.

2 My Journey

Many generations before I began my personal journey of teaching students in underserved communities, I was provided a legacy that could not be denied. I have to admit that my family has always been privileged in ways that I didn't realize until I was much older. To this day I am still realizing how lucky I was and how unusual my family and their educational experiences are. When my grandmother was a little girl, my great-grandfather passed away, leaving her, her mother, and her little brother living in the projects on the South Side of Chicago.

It didn't take long for my great-grandmother to realize that this wasn't a life that could be sustained for herself or her children for very long. So she did something very unusual. As a Black, widower, living in the projects in the 1930s, she went back to college. Knowing that she wouldn't be able to support both my grandmother and her brother, she sent my great-uncle away to live with relatives. My grandmother very rarely talks of this time in her life, but she told me about a time when she had to cook their food on a hot plate in the hallway while rats scurried along. My great-grandmother would continue to defy what was expected of her based on her race, gender, and marital status. Somehow and in some way she managed to send her two children to college and have them graduate. It shouldn't be surprising to learn that both my great-grandmother and my grandmother became

teachers. My grandmother married another teacher and then raised more teachers. You can say teaching is my family's profession. Throughout my youth I always said that I would never become a teacher, but I could never deny the pride and sense of self that I had due to the fact that I was from a tribe of teachers.

Much of my life was intertwined with the families and students of my family members. I have strong memories of opening up my grandparents' door and seeing teenagers standing there, basketball in hand, asking for my grandfather. He would always let them in, let them play basketball in the backyard, and would feed them. I usually was reading a book or antagonizing them by riding a variety of children's toys through their games. As I became older, I realized that these people were his students, that these teenagers showing up on his doorstep didn't have what I had, and that my grandfather was giving them something that they didn't have elsewhere. More times than I can count, I have been with my grandparents, mother, aunts, uncle, cousins, or godparents, and they have been stopped by someone calling, "Ms. ____" or "Mr. ______, do you remember me? I was in your Kindergarten class," or "I remember how you would let all the guys from the team come over and play ball in your back yard," or "I've never forgotten you, and I just wanted to tell you thank you." It became clear to me as I grew older that I needed to continue the legacy that my family had given me–just as long as it wasn't inside a classroom. My family's legacy led me to the conclusion that I must have a career in which I could make a difference, but I swore that teaching wasn't going to be it. So, what convinced me? It was my own vague niggling sense of unease at how I was personally becoming different from those around me through my educational experiences. While my family taught almost exclusively in underserved, high-need communities, they made sure that I would not be one of their students. I was sent to schools for the gifted, schools in the suburbs, and honestly schools that they wished their students had the opportunities to attend.

My first real understanding that I was getting something different in school from my friends was when I visited my godmother's school. I didn't understand why the school had bars on the windows. I was confused when the students didn't have books and why they were wandering the hallways and not in class. It was hard for me to talk to her students. Students that were of my age were reading and working on skills that I had learned years before. Very quickly, I had a new stigma attached that I had not experienced before. I was acting "white," I was talking "white," and I was no longer allowed to be a part of their group. Seemingly, by attaining what everyone said was important I had lost my membership card to be part of my own race. Later, after years of study, I would learn that this is a very typical response from disenfranchised groups, as is carefully discussed in Ronald Takaki's book, *A Different Mirror* (2008). But this offered a very limited worldview as to what was really causing the disparities I was beginning to witness between my friends (who attended the schools where my elders taught) and me. I was Brown, and all of my friends were Brown, and all of the schools my family worked in served only Brown students. While I was confused and thought that it was weird that my old friends weren't doing the same thing as I was, I didn't understand that this was an issue of race, class, and access. While I was still in elementary school, my family moved to

the West Coast to a mainly White suburb, but I did not blend in. My teachers were surprised when they learned that I could write multiple page essays. They were surprised to realize that I was reading well above my grade level, and often didn't know what to do with me in their classes. Thankfully, my mother never stopped being an advocate for my education, and she quickly understood that I was not going to be served in the space that I had been placed in. Years later, unsurprisingly considering my early educational experiences, I eventually ended up being the only Black kid in the advanced classes, in the honors classes, in the Advance Placement classes, and the list can go on.

It became clear to me at this time that I had an obligation to become a teacher. I had gotten lucky through fate. It was fateful that someone I barely knew made the decision to defy the odds and become a teacher. It was fateful that my grandmother was an early childhood educator and understood that it was imperative that I was read to every night, that I was enrolled in a pre-school, and that I was expected to love books and the act of learning. It was fateful that I had a mother who knew I was being underserved and fought year after year to make sure that I received the education that I was promised and deserved. I had gotten "lucky" that I had a family that understood and promoted the idea that it was great to be a "nerd" and that there was nothing wrong with choosing to read a book rather than go to that new, cool movie.

As a result of these collective experiences I became fired up. How was it right for me to get lucky? What about those other Brown kids at my high school who were barely making it in the suburbs? What about my old friends from elementary school on the South Side of Chicago? What had happened to them? Perhaps the most important question I faced was this: "Why does someone that's Brown or poor or living in an underserved community have to get "lucky" to receive a rigorous, high quality education?" I left high school with a burning need to do something about this problem, to do something about this injustice that I saw and had just begun to identify. Who was I to take the gifts that I had been offered but not pay it forward? What if I could be like my family and walk into a store, hear my name called, and have someone walk up to me 20 years later and remind me of the effect that my class, words, or actions had on their lives and families. As teachers we become part of the fabric of people's lives. The portion that teachers help weave can never be fully cut or unwoven, and that comes with a great responsibility that I wanted to be a part of.

In the end, to get me to where I wanted to be I knew I had to do something different. When I first started college, I declared myself to be a music education major; my hope was that I would be able to combine two of my largest passions. Sadly, this educational experience echoed so many that I had already had in life. But as so often, there was a single moment that I can pinpoint that set me again down a different path. I was sitting in my college course, Music Education Pedagogy 301. My professor was talking about the schools we would work in when we would eventually student teach. I was excited thinking that I could head to a school similar to the one where my grandparents taught. I raised my hand and asked my professor if we would be getting placed in neighborhoods that needed us the

most. He replied, “No, why would we do that? Those students will never be able to do what you want them to do.” The students he described were like me. Those students he talked about were my friends.

That day I decided to change my major; I would not be studying education in college. So I had to come up with a different plan to do the work I had promised myself that I would do. I joined Teach For America and got my wish. On my very first day of working as a Corps member, my grandparents held their 50th wedding anniversary celebration. I ended up missing the celebration because I was the other side of the country beginning my teaching career, but 30 students spanning their more than 40 years as teachers showed up and spoke about how my grandparents’ work changed their lives. Hearing about that, I realized that I had made the right decision and that being an educator in any way, shape, or form was the only option for me.

3 My Teaching

I spent my early teaching career in a major metropolitan center in the southwestern portion of the United States. The school in which I worked contained scholars in grades 5–8. We had a student population that numbered more than 1,000 and the campus sprawled the length of two major city blocks. Our school campus was surrounded by a nine-foot high fence topped with spikes. Running along the middle of the fence from eye level to one’s ankles was a metal plate. I was told this was needed so that the neighborhood gang members couldn’t taunt or threaten our students. When I first arrived at my school site, my students shared with me that the school had been used several times as a prison in a variety of film shoots. That’s not surprising considering the graffiti that was sprawled all over the building, the fence with barbed wire that surrounded the physical education areas, and, lest we forget, the whine of police helicopters that often flew over our school.

I taught eighth grade U.S. history and physical science. Our school operated on an ‘A’/‘B’ schedule. For my teaching schedule I would teach three 90-min block classes, with one day being history classes and the other science classes. Due to our status as a Title I and Program Improvement school, we had access to a number of resources including additional funding and technology to support our work. My classroom was a science lab. With our additional funding I was lucky. I had a document camera, which is a high tech version of an overhead projector, speakers, and an LCD projector. The desks were squeezed entirely too close to each other as most of my floor space was taken up by lab tables which contained sinks with running water and non-functioning gas lines. Being the new teacher, I was responsible for the largest classes with the highest number of students who were not wanted elsewhere. This resulted in one of my classes having almost 40 students if everyone showed up to school that day. I didn’t have enough seats for everyone, so students were forced to stand and sit on lab stools and at lab tables. I quickly

realized that the reasons why these students weren't learning were staring me right in the face.

Ninety-nine percent of our student population was eligible for free and reduced lunch based on their family income. This means that 99 % of my students at my school site were at or below the poverty line. The economic woes of the community that I worked in were very visibly reflected in our surroundings, especially the homes and sidewalks. Many of the houses were covered in gang-related graffiti and housed multi-generational families. In the residential neighborhoods that surrounded our school, front yards were sometimes neatly maintained, but often you would see trash, broken vehicles, and weeds everywhere. Most often in the early morning, you would see people pushing carts filled with bottles that they collected from the street and were taking to earn money for recycling them. Windows almost always had wrought iron bars and were heavily secured. I could see the gardens growing in the front yards of the houses that surrounded the school filled with broken bottles and trash that had blown in from the street. In the mornings, our custodial staff would go out and clean the sidewalks, but by the time school was dismissed the grounds would be filled with trash again.

The economic woes of my students' lives were not solely seen in their houses and sidewalks. They were also reflected in the hunger in their eyes, their inability to concentrate after working late into the evening to bring home additional income, and in their clothes: shoes that were taped together not for style but for function, pants that had to remain spotless, as they were their only pair, and shirts that were three sizes too big or too small. Somewhat ironically, our school was surrounded by industry. Right outside of the residential housing, we had all types of factories that sprawled across many city blocks. These factories often spewed a variety of chemicals and pollutants into the air. Many times we would hear the sirens of fire trucks heading to the factories to put out another fire. Not surprisingly, this would often lead many of my scholars to have severe asthma attacks and high sensitivity to allergens.

In the neighborhoods that surrounded the school, immigrants from Central and South America lived, making a vibrant community for our first-generation American students. The communities surrounding the school often took on the flavor of countries from which students' parents had immigrated. When I walked around the neighborhood, they would greet me and stop to introduce me to their neighbors. Young children played on sidewalks, often leaving their toys scattered around. When I arrived in the morning, I would hear roosters crowing from the surrounding houses waking up the neighborhood. On the corner a small market sold everything imaginable to our students—chips, breakfast tamales, hot chocolate, coffee, and toys. The vendors would most often sell students their favorite snacks of Hot Cheetos, Monster energy drinks, candies, and a variety of toys. The neighborhood similarly came alive when school was over. Leaving school, I often heard songs of the ice cream truck, Latin music, and the bass from the passing cars.

In my very first classroom I had a chant that I made my students and myself recite every day: "Today is a new day. I will do my best. I will learn!" Little did my students know that I was the one who needed to recite that mantra. They came to

embody my practice. Every day is a new chance for me as a teacher to get it right. I would do my best when I walked into my classroom, and I was determined that before I left that classroom at the end of the day every one of my students would have learned. I didn't want to have a classroom of students that just learned school-valued facts or details. When I said "learn," I meant that students would learn about themselves, their communities, or a story that had remained untold. I wanted to create world citizens. I wanted to form people who were socially aware, who knew the untold stories of our country and their countries of origin, and who were able construct complex understandings about the world around them. How, as a teacher, can I fully actualize the ideals that I've set for myself and others?

Many of the organizations that I have belonged to and work for have provided core values that have guided my goals for myself and my students. Teach For America's oft-touted tag line, "One day all children will have the opportunity to receive an excellent education," became my anti-mantra. I wanted one day to be today, every day in my classroom and in all of the classrooms in all of the schools that I had ever worked in.

During the development of my identity as a teacher I often heard the advice, "Don't smile until December." I quickly realized that those tidbits of wisdom would never work for me. The key for me starting to become an effective teacher was when I did laugh or tell a joke; in fewer words–when I was myself. I strongly believe that the greatest teachers are ones that display their flaws for students. Great teachers discuss when they make mistakes. They share what caused the mistake and how they are going to fix it. This allows authentic relationships to be built. No one wants to open up and share his or her hardships with a robot. These relationships are crucial in the hard work of teaching students who have been systematically disadvantaged in their education. Relationships often are the key to being allowed to access and take down the barriers that are preventing a student from learning or a parent from becoming invested in the school. In my experience, the teachers that were the most effective were also ones that showed students they cared. One way they did this was through exceptionally high expectations of themselves as teachers and of their students. This sounds easy to uphold in passing but in reality is a constant challenge when faced with the barriers our students face when it comes to learning. This realization forced me to ask more of my scholars and to be more forthright about the challenges that they were going to face. I most often offered risk-taking as a tool we could use to begin addressing the academic and social challenges that they would experience.

I know that when we are willing to take risks, we learn how to succeed, but perhaps more importantly we learn how to fail and then recover. At first, the most often spoken utterances in my classroom were, "I can't," "This is stupid," "How much longer?" "You want me to do what?" I realized I was getting nowhere. While all of my students struggled with skills and content, they were more afraid of failing than anything else. A lot of my work around classroom culture was creating an atmosphere in which my students felt comfortable enough to take those risks and were subsequently developing the skills to meet any challenge, academic or personal. A great resource that assisted me in building that sense of community was a

book called *Tribes* by Gibbs (1987). She provides a structure and a number of activities that help create a sense of family or tribe among others which then can be used build trust, and eventually a foundation for all to take risks to push themselves further in learning.

One of the fundamental drivers of my teaching is that my students must learn. This seems simple and obvious, but often with the "noise" that surrounds teaching and schools, it can easily be forgotten. I know firsthand that one of the biggest barriers to my students' learning is their inability to actively use a text, which coincides with their lack of school-valued literacy skills. I strongly believe that every teacher is a literacy teacher. Every subject area demands different types of literacy skills, but usually scholars get a singular view of reading and a singular set of reading skills. My students have often received literacy instruction that requires them to review basic literacy principles, read disjointed texts, and learn skills out-of-context through the use of scripted reading programs. Learning to read in such limited ways leaves little room for them to learn a variety of literacy strategies, and so it leaves them disabled when those skills are needed. As a teacher, I want my students to leave my classroom with a backpack filled with tools to be used in any situation and be well versed in when and how to use these tools.

Every time I step into my classroom, I know that it is my job to provide my students with skills that they may be missing. It's also my job to provide them with a complete and well-rounded education including teaching the "whole" child. Often in the schools that I have worked in we have gotten caught in the trap of "fixing" the academic deficiencies of students, invariably causing us to ignore their other social, emotional, and academic needs. My students often walk into my classroom carrying additional baggage that cannot be seen. It's my belief that in my classroom, while my students are here we all check our baggage at the door and my room is a safe place.

This idea became very concrete for me one day as Jose came late to class. Always a stickler for being on time myself, I told my students that we never have a moment to waste. As Jose walked into my room late, he didn't make eye contact, didn't greet me, and didn't begin his work. I was getting frustrated with him. We had spent a lot of time building our relationship and closing his skill gap so he could be successful in class. In that moment he had regressed to September.

I went to Jose and asked if everything was all right. "Not really," he said, and then he pushed out his chair and began to work. I asked another student what was wrong. It turned out that the gunfire outside that morning before the early class bell wasn't just another random incident. Jose, while standing by the fence, witnessed his cousin being shot before being forced to come to class. In that moment I had forgotten the realities that my students often faced before and after they walked through my doors. I offered Jose an extremely rare pass to visit our school counselor if he wanted to. He shook his head, hid his eyes, and went back to work.

As an educator, I can't forget the additional challenges that are being carried by my students. After that incident, I have always created plans that are scaffolded to acknowledge their personal challenges but will not allow them to interfere with their learning. The messaging that I give to my students is that we must leverage our

individual challenges to make us better learners and people. I will not and cannot allow their challenges to interfere with their goals and success. I found that often as a first-year teacher I just didn't have the teaching tools to help my most challenging students. A resource that I often turned to was *Teaching Students with Learning and Behavior Problems* by Candace S. Bos and Sharon Vaughn. This book provided specific strategies that I could use for content learning, reading, and writing skills.

While I have my own experiences that shaped my beliefs, several educators and educational groups have provided the language and core values that inform my teaching. As a Teach For America Corps member it became ingrained that data was the key to having an informed practice. The work of Paul Bambrick-Santoyo in the book *Driven by Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction* gave me a practical guide to implementing the belief that data is one of the key drivers of student learning. One of the key turning points in my becoming an effective teacher was when I was able to master the technique of knowing what my students did and didn't know, having students being informed about their progress, and then being able to do something about it. Paul Bambrick-Santoyo is an advocate of making data transparent. He believes that for data to work all stakeholders must be able to access it, understand what it means, and be able to do something about it.

But how do you make many data points purposeful, time effective, and relevant for yourself and 180 students? One weekend, I went to the teacher store and purchased six sticker charts. I wrote every student's name and every standard they would need to master across the top of the charts. Every week we took a quiz, and before the end of the day I would be sure to have every student's sticker line completed. After a few weeks, I was amazed to note how many students started coming during snack and recess asking if it was time for their review session. Sean, an admitted gang member and proud owner of a court-ordered ankle bracelet, even dragged his friends up to the fourth floor to see his row of smiling star stickers next to his name on the charts. Data was alive and well in my classroom, and it was working to drive their achievement.

As I've often worked with scholars who are not native English speakers, and as a monolingual teacher, and a huge proponent of leveraging relationships, I was very concerned about not being able to communicate with my students and their families. I also quickly realized that I faced a larger barrier than just being able to speak Spanish. I was naively fooled into thinking that because the majority of my students spoke fairly fluent English that they had the skills or were prepared to engage in academic discourse and content. How do I teach students who could not speak or write the academic or content language needed for them to "be successful"? I wrestled with monitoring my thoughts to avoid lowering my expectations for my students. I struggled with this: If they can explain it to me in their own words, is it actually meaningful for them to also be pushed to write and speak the same understandings utilizing academic language? After much reflection and debate, I realized that I must start with my students explaining the concepts in their own words, but I could not end there. To do so would break the promises I made to myself, to them and their families. For this population, I learned how important it is to provide a variety of graphic organizers and literacy structures.

I also have acquired many teacher "moves" to assist all of my scholars in accessing difficult primary and secondary source texts. Two great texts that provide guidance for me in helping students access a variety texts are *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts: 4–12* by Gallagher (2004) and *50 Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners* by Herrell and Jordan (2008). Dave Lemov's work from Uncommon Schools titled *Teach Like a Champion* (2010) provides tactile steps that can be taken to create a structured classroom. The creation of a structured, high functioning classroom allows me to teach the skills and concepts that my students need to learn. I've also found that reading the narratives of other teachers that work in the communities similar to ones that I have worked into be immensely inspiring and helpful. Books such as *Educating Esme* (2009) by Esmé Raji Codell, *Teacher Man* by McCourt (2005) and Rafe Esquith's *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire: The Methods and Madness Inside Rm. 56* (2007) provided me with insights about successful teachers and their fortunate students. All these texts make a compelling case that having high expectations, teaching the whole child, and constantly improving one's teaching craft can have a major impact on student achievement.

One of the greatest challenges in teaching literacy is getting students to communicate in writing. In graduate school, I learned the importance of writing in developing complex thinking. I realized writing forces students to practice many components of being a high quality reader, analyzing information and then synthesizing the information to produce new ideas. While pedagogically I knew this was a valid focus for my class, no one was doing this work with students at my school and I did not know if it would work. All I could use was my faith, and commitment to my students to properly prepare them for their next step. I knew that if I didn't attempt to do this, it didn't matter what I did well if I stayed in my instructional comfort zone, I would continue to underserve my students and their families.

We know that writing is the ultimate culmination of literacy skills, and writing can be very difficult to do when basic literacy skills are missing. While that was true for this group of students, what made it different is that in this case they had a wealth of information to write about that they were invested and interested in. Perhaps more importantly, they had been given the words that needed to be written from the experiences of their families and communities.

Each content area that you teach poses its own challenges. As I spent four years teaching history, I know that this is an area that requires intense literacy and writing skills and the ability to recall facts and details. The most complex, important portions of class are when we combine the use of secondary texts and historical details/facts and then use this information to produce written and verbal analysis and commentary. When my students are unable to comprehend or decode the text, completing the work needed to fully understand historical concepts becomes infinitely more difficult. While it is possible to learn content without literacy, it is a disservice to my students. If I were to teach one without the other, my students would not develop the skills they need to be successful in other academic environments where key information is communicated primarily through written texts.

In my classroom the skill gap is not the only challenge that I face in developing my students' literacy abilities. With the advent of No Child Left Behind, school rankings, and being targeted as a PI 5 or "Program Improvement 5" school, the stakes are extremely high. If my school didn't perform or meet certain testing mandates, it could be taken over by the district or the state, and we will lose control of our school. When the mandates are not met and the school becomes eligible for takeover, any teacher can be removed, the school may be broken into smaller schools, and the administration will change. It becomes very clear, very fast that with these types of stakes the focus shifts from teaching students the skills and processes they need to be successful in college and the long term, to teaching them standards, discreet pieces of knowledge, and content without context. Layered over these institutional pressures on teachers, my students have their own pressures that impact their ability to practice their literacy skills.

Many times factors outside of school prevented me from developing students' skills. I recall when one of my students disappeared for two months. I asked all of my students where he had gone, called his house, and contacted every person I could think of to get in touch with him or his family. Finally he reappeared at school. When he came, I asked, "Where have you been?" He replied, "I got caught riding in a stolen car with my friends, so I was in juvie (juvenile detention center)."

I had another student named Jessica, who was one of my best students. She often came to school late, was unfocused, fell asleep in class, and in general wasn't with it. After weeks of investigating, I found out she was the sole caretaker of her 24-*day*-old sibling after school and through the night as her parents worked. When the baby was sick she was unable to come to school, as she was the only option her parents had for taking the baby to the doctor and providing care. Senea was a sixth grader who was an only child. At the beginning of the year she was cheerful, peppy, and always seemed to have it together. By May she was withdrawn, sullen, and no longer performing at her previous capacity. After I saw her cry in class for days, it became clear something was going on. We finally discovered that her family had become homeless and she had moved into several different shelters and was now commuting more than hour each way to come to school. Acknowledging the challenges my students faced that prevented them from being physically present in class made it more pressing that I help them overcome their academic deficiencies so that they could have access to whatever opportunities they wished to pursue.

It was two months before the eighth-grade state test. At that time my school was under enormous pressure to make significant growth on our test scores or we would be eligible to be taken over the by school district with the consequences described above. As we dived deeper into preparing for the test using backwards planning, it became clear that my students were not ready. How could they be ready when the test had content from four different years of history? How were we supposed to review when class time was eaten up by school lock-downs, eighth-grade culmination ceremonies, and student searches? Adding to these challenges, it was the first time in their school careers that they were being asked to write responses using evidence and primary sources on a state test. As the test date approached, we worked on building our document analysis skills, and it became achingly clear that

we were still not ready. Students were still working on pulling evidence out of the text accurately and consistently. They were still practicing understanding the main ideas of the text. We were still perfecting answering questions with complete sentences every time. In that moment I realized I had made a fatal error. I had spent an entire year helping my students learn basic literacy skills but I hadn't worked on having them extract and synthesize information from texts.

What was I going to do? I couldn't choose for my students to opt out of the test, but I also couldn't send them to take the test and not properly prepare them. So we spent the next two months writing. What do you do when you have students that stare at a blank paper for 90 min at a time unable to form a complete sentence and write it down? How do you teach a student who has missed half of the school year to analyze a text from 1776, pull evidence, and then incorporate it into a coherent essay in response to a prompt? These are questions that have solutions. The answers lie in hard work, leveraging relationships, better planning, and using data to discover what has been learned and what still needs to be learned. These and more are the challenges that face all teachers, but in the communities where I have worked, they are exacerbated by the additional challenges my students face every day. We eventually solved our dilemma with no excuses and a lot of hard work.

Oh, speaking of hard work, I built graphic organizers to help them prepare to be able to write. We wrote literally for hours every week in class. I gave one-on-one feedback to students in and out of class. We posted students' writing samples and gave whole class feedback. Whenever I saw a parent, I explained how they could give feedback on their student's writing. I developed rubrics to help scaffold this daunting task. Homework assignments became targeted to practice the skills that were foundational. Perhaps most importantly, we maintained the narrative that it could be done and it would be done. And it in the end, it was done. I knew we had reached success when Betty, a student who often spent her class time staring off into the distance, filled so many pages during a practice timed write that she had to ask for more paper. When the class exploded in applause, I knew we had been successful, and so did she.

The hidden secret to becoming a great reader is having a broad and expansive background knowledge. While many of my students were not familiar with some forms of school-valued knowledge, they had developed very sophisticated understandings about the realities of poverty, violence, multiculturalism, cultural heritage, and racism. My students tended to have a broad range of experiences, which allowed them to view class material and talk about the world around them in different ways. This became readily apparent while reading a text on profiling. That day in class we were going to be discussing Jim Crow laws, and I wanted students to understand before we got to the text that the laws we were going to study were *de jure* expressions of what they lived through on a regular basis.

I had taught this same lesson the year before without providing a supplementary text to access their background knowledge. It bombed. This time we utilized supplementary texts to build their background knowledge to attack the difficult primary sources. I had learned a very basic lesson. One of the most important aspects of reading is being able to access your background knowledge to

understand what the text is referring to, especially in non-fiction readings. While my students are often unfamiliar with certain types of literature that are valued in school, they often have a more nuanced and personal view of social and cultural themes contained in texts. These stores of knowledge and experience become more apparent when I discussed issues of class, race, and a variety of cultural experiences from different groups.

When working in underserved communities, finding relevancy in texts is a key component in getting student engagement. But as a word of caution–this doesn't mean that every book has to be written by Sandra Cisneros or Walter Dean Myers. The challenge is to access the banks of knowledge that our students have about the world. How do you use the experiences and understandings that our students bring to a text and engage them in challenging and skill-building work? The answer to these questions often is finding the thread that connects the text or idea to their personal experiences. Kelly Gallagher talks in depth about the importance of building background knowledge in his book *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4–12*. While describing the powerful effects of background knowledge on the depth of understanding a student or an adult can have with a text, he states, "When we read something new, we are much more likely to understand it if we see connections that make it relevant. When these connections are murky or unseen, reading comprehension gets cloudy" (2004, p. 25). The idea that a text can be cloudy for a student is exactly why building and accessing a student's background knowledge is critical. If we recognize and access the specialized information our students bring with them to our classrooms, we can have a profound affect on their comprehension and, ultimately, their literacy skills. Often in my class I tried to use their standing background knowledge to propel them into a more formal study of topics.

One of my favorite projects with my students is a Manifest Destiny project, an assignment that addresses social justice themes. It's fairly progressive and requires students to research not just the acquisition of land but also what motivated conquerors to seize the land, who was there before conquerors arrived, and how the indigenous peoples reacted to conquerors. Students pick a territory to study at the very beginning of the project and discuss why they choose that territory. I would often hear reasons for selecting a territory based on the personal histories of students.

Once, when I sent this project home, the very next day one of my students' parents came to the school and shared that she was incredibly excited about this project. Why? It turned out that this mom is from Haiti and her daughter had selected the Louisiana Purchase. In the 5 min of sharing why she was excited, she taught me more about a revolution and the impetus for a sale than I had learned in four years of college. That store of culturally relevant knowledge is one that is not often used in classrooms, but I found it to be invaluable in building students' knowledge and engaging them in history.

At the end of the project, students were asked to interview a family member about their knowledge of the area that they studied. Students came back with pages of transcripts from home, of grandmothers who told stories of their grandparents'

experiences of conquistadors arriving, or of once being a part of a native population, or of how certain events changed their families' lives. My families were invested, and now it was time to tackle the hardest part of the project. With all of the information they had gathered, we turned our eye towards producing a publishable research paper.

As I experienced in my own family, among the greatest promoters of reading are parents and other family members. I have found that no matter where a parent falls on the literacy spectrum, he or she almost universally understands the importance of reading. The families I've worked with have been insistent that their child learn how to read and how to read well. In the stories that I have been told, this is motivated by the hardships that they have faced because of their own struggles with literacy. I once had the father of one of my highest performing students admit that he could barely read. He told me that his daughter had to learn how to read. He didn't want her to spend the rest of her life working in a job that would barely pay the bills, a job that would often leave her without the things she needed or might want in life. He didn't want his daughter to struggle throughout life because she was unable to understand written directions, contracts, or signs. It's interesting to think about the motivations propelling the parents of my students to promote reading. Parents who were unable to attain literacy for themselves may have fueled my students' motivation to become great readers.

4 The Impact

It's indescribable to watch a student who has faced innumerable challenges become successful, knowing that you played a role in his or her development, are a part of that student's life, and provided a foundation to move forward in achieving whatever he or she wants. To be honest, the greatest rewards usually don't come until I have stopped teaching a student. I recall one day leaving the building early to pick up pizzas for a student celebration in my classroom. I left Dominos with six pizzas stacked high, and I was struggling to get my car door open. All of a sudden, someone was helping me. I didn't see that person approach, and quite frankly I was startled. When I turned around, I saw Jose, one of my very favorite former students. In the past year or so, he's grown considerably, and the first thing he did was reach out and give me a big hug. "Miss!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" I replied. After exchanging a few words, I asked him about high school and if he's doing well and about a few of his comrades. As he was getting ready to leave, I reminded him of the goals he had in eighth grade and to continue to work for them. He looked back at me and said, "Don't worry. I won't forget," and he walked away. Throughout the years I've run into many of my students and have had similar experiences. One of the greatest outcomes of this work is the knowledge that I did my job and one of my students is doing the very thing they had been told they couldn't do.

Another impact of this work is the ability to be a safe haven for your students. Although I love my students, they tend to get into spots of trouble in many of their other classes. I remember one student in my second year of teaching. Christopher was a bright student who had been dismissed from the gifted program because of severe defiance and misbehavior. One day Christopher showed up at my classroom door during one of his many out-of-school suspensions. Our campus was surrounded by a high fence that he climbed to come to history class. Knowing that he was suspended and shouldn't have been on campus, I was very surprised to see him standing there. When I asked him what he was doing there, he just said, "I wanted to come to class." To be honest, every day with this student wasn't angels singing from the heavens. Often he frustrated me, pushed the boundaries of my classroom, and frequently refused to learn. But that day, when he showed up, I got my reward. Christopher was disengaged from school and was at risk of becoming a dropout in the eighth grade. I knew that in that moment he started to reengage in school, and knowing that I played a part was priceless.

One of the best benefits of working with my families is that they most often consider me to be a part of their family. It's an incredible feeling to get invited to birthday parties, soccer games, holidays, and a variety of other celebrations that are important to them and those around them. I've had mothers of my students offer medicine when I was sick, bring food when they make a special dish, and invite me to sit at their tables and eat with them. The families that I have worked with will openly announce that they consider me to be their child's mother, father, aunt, uncle, sister, brother, or other relative when they are in my care. They trust that their child's teacher is going to give their child everything necessary to be successful and fruitful in the world. Receiving the love and warmth from our families and knowing that I am an integral part of their family's future is a reward whose value can't be calculated.

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“I was beginning to ask the right questions.”

Leslie M. Reich

Abstract Leslie Reich taught ninth-grade English at a school in Los Angeles after participating in Teach for America’s Summer Institute. Leslie attributes her social justice leanings to growing up in a family that emphasized public service. As a new teacher, she recognized that she needed to first learn the intricacies of the community in which her students lived and began to pursue diversity and inclusiveness learning. She asked questions of her students and their families, engaged in dialogue with her colleagues, and read as much as she could on issues related to diversity, inclusiveness, and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Keywords Importing books · Ninth-grade English · Poetry anthology · TFA

1 Introduction

In October 2007, two months into my first year of teaching, students answered the question, “Anything else you want me to know?” at the bottom of their class assignments. Roberto wrote, “Nah, I’m good.” Jasmine printed, “I’m hungry.” I was chilled by fifteen-year-old Jimmy’s response: “Stop trying to make us do this stuff. It don’t matter anyway.”

Jimmy communicated the messages of his world: *My efforts are irrelevant* and *I’ve stopped believing in myself.* As became increasingly clear to me during those first months of teaching, Jimmy was far from the only student convinced he could not be successful. I asked myself, “How can I teach him to read and write if he doesn’t believe in himself?”

At the time, I didn’t know that I should have been asking very different questions: How can I understand Jimmy and his community better? Who can I learn from? What biases and privileges have been hidden from my view that will impact

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the way I approach this challenge? I desperately wanted Jimmy and his classmates to succeed, but I was blind to the fact that my limited self-reflection regarding my own race and class, and even more limited knowledge of the community I was entering, would present a fundamental mismatch between how I was prepared to teach and how my students were prepared to learn.

2 My Journey

As a child at my synagogue's nursery school, we welcomed the Sabbath with song. Each Friday, one three-year-old girl—called the *imma* ("mother")—selected a three-year-old boy—*abba* ("father")—to be her partner in leading the tunes. The actual parents of the *imma* and *abba* were invited to attend class that day. When it was my turn to be *imma*, I chose a boy named Aaron to be the *abba*. Afterwards, my father asked why I'd chosen Aaron; I responded that none of the other girls had ever chosen him before.

When my father tells this story, he likes to say I was born with a good heart. I like to say I was born social justice-oriented. For my parents—who brought three boys and me into the world—fairness and equality were ideals by which to live. But particularly after my mother founded a charity called Cancer Cured Kids, which integrated child cancer survivors back into their schools, I learned that life was not equally fair. As my family pursued public service through *mitzvahs* ("good deeds") throughout my childhood and adolescence, I discovered a world in which equal treatment was not the norm.

As a kid and as an adolescent, I wanted to be a teacher so that I could "fix" the world. What allowed me to ultimately pursue this goal, even though I grew up hearing that teachers were grossly underpaid, I had the economic cushion of knowing that I would never want for anything. The very fact that my parents encouraged me to pursue my goal to be a teacher is a mark of privilege that many Americans are not afforded. Many feel pressured to make enough money to support multiple members of their families, must earn a lot of money to pay back college and graduate school loans, and value money as a mark of having achieved the American Dream. But I had the desire and the means to pursue a career in education working towards social justice, and I did just that.

It was walking around the campus of the University of Pennsylvania that I discovered Teach for America (TFA). I attended information sessions and spoke to a TFA recruiter to learn more about the organization. I was shocked by the statistics with which I was presented: only 1 in 3 children growing up in poverty will graduate from high school and only 9 % will earn a bachelor's degree by age 25. I was inspired to fulfill what I viewed as the ultimate *mitzvah*: teaching in a high-poverty community. As someone with much, I would give to those with too little.

I didn't realize that the articulation of "those who have too little" was a flawed understanding of the students and families I would meet as a teacher. And I also didn't realize that this set me up with a fundamental lack of humility that would allow me to ask the questions I needed to ask and learn from the people I needed to learn from. It was no wonder I would feel paralyzed upon coming face-to-face with the achievement gap.

As a bright-eyed twenty-two-year-old, I applied to the first round TFA application deadline and prepared to teach English to high school students in Los Angeles, California. I moved cross-country with a few hundred other Teach for America corps members and endured the six-week boot camp known as the *Institute*. The vision of myself as a selfless savior blinded me to the controversies surrounding TFA. I would enter the classroom with only six weeks of training, during which I would be taught largely by people who had only a few years of classroom experience. I would spend too little time studying theory and debating the ethics and strategies of strong classroom instruction. I would become part of a trend in which America's most underperforming students would be taught by America's least experienced teachers. But I didn't know, and I didn't ask. And soon I was excited to be immersed in discussions of how to educate America's children.

One day, the approximately 300 Los Angeles corps members boarded a bus headed for a public middle school. In the auditorium, dozens of principals in suits sat behind portable tables. We were ushered into classrooms according to our content areas. I took off my suit jacket, removed a book from my briefcase, and settled down at a desk. Three minutes later, I was called into the auditorium. A principal from a high school in South Central had seen my resume and wanted to interview me. I replaced my suit jacket, lifted my briefcase, and walked down the hall. After introducing myself to a tall, blond man, I sat down across from him.

"Let me tell you a little about our school," he said. "We are a small school on the campus of a larger school near downtown. We have 16 teachers. Our teachers run projects-based curricula, and you'd be teaching freshman English. Do you want to work at our school?"

The interview was over. That's how I got my first teaching position.

My classroom was a converted woodshop room. It was approximately 70 ft by 70 ft. The ceiling was probably 30 ft high, and the industrial air conditioning vents ran below the ceiling. When turned on, the noise of the vents diluted my voice; I practically needed to shout to be heard. Students shared tables as desks; chairs were purple (a neutral gang color in the neighborhood, I later learned). There were about seventy-five students in the room (about fifteen of whom would transfer schools within the first two weeks) with two teachers of different content areas. I had an LCD projector, a desk, two bookcases, and no books.

This classroom certainly didn't look like the ones in which I grew up learning. Those were havens of academia that featured bright colors, student work proudly displayed, and hundreds upon hundreds of books. I was shocked—not because my classroom did not match the vision of it in my head, but because I had never

thought to question my vision. My vision was a product of my educational privilege. How was I, a young adult just beginning to think critically about her own upbringing and the ways in which she was free to move about in society, supposed to reconcile my naïve image of good teaching with the concrete and unanticipated challenge ahead of me?

3 My Teaching

In my classroom, the reading levels of my ninth graders ranged from ready-for-*To Kill a Mockingbird* to struggles-with-*Dr. Seuss*—from above ninth grade to differentiating *b* and *d*. I asked myself rhetorically: "They're *how far* behind?" As high school students, I had believed that the central goal of teachers was to help form children into decent human beings. I wanted my students to believe in themselves, to discover and create their own convictions, and to gain an understanding of themselves as citizens. Math, science, English, social studies, language—all were a means to achieve these lofty goals. But shaping children into decent human beings isn't enough if they don't have the academic skills necessary to operate within 21st century America. Before I knew my students well, and before I realized just how essential knowing my students as individuals would be in helping them meet their potentials, all I could see were their academic deficits: they could not organize a basic five-paragraph essay, they had never given oral presentations, and they could not take systematic notes based on a lecture.

Teaching these skills would be difficult, however, with teenagers like Jimmy thinking they couldn't achieve. So I first set out to learn more about their mindsets. To them, the achievement gap was more than a nationwide trend; it was an everyday reality. They articulated feeling stupid ("This is too hard for me"), worthless ("What's the point?"), and incapable of learning ("I can't do this"). They had acquired this mindset after years of being held to low expectations. Fourteen-year-old Jose told me his eighth grade teacher had let the class watch movies most days, and his seventh grade teacher had given coloring assignments. Most of his classmates told similar stories of teachers who sat at their desks and read their email during class, of schools that would not allow students access to the books for fear the books would come back damaged, of success marked by students seated quietly with strong attendance numbers, of not being allowed into classrooms due to being out of uniform.

But they also told stories of teachers who believed in them, who assigned rigorous work, and who cared for them as individuals. I learned about a third grade teacher who read Shakespeare with his students and about a principal who wrote personalized notes to each student during the holiday season. I heard about celebrations in honor of real academic successes and of holidays the students' families celebrated, about teachers who taught with love and respect and who worked from dawn until dusk for their students and offering free tutoring on weekends.

The complexities of the achievement gap revealed stories that were contradictory and that varied greatly from student to student and from year to year. And, I would come to learn, the achievement gap overlapped with other American institutions: healthcare, housing conditions, access to healthy food and exercise opportunities, transportation options, job availability, and the legal system, to name a few. If a student was absent, I sometimes found out that she had spent the entire day at the free clinic waiting to see a doctor who never showed up. Sometimes she stayed home to babysit younger siblings while a parent took an elderly member of the family to the hospital. Sometimes she had appointments with immigration officers.

When the father of twins Yvette and Yvonne was injured at work, but could not afford legal assistance and worker's compensation did not seem to be a realistic possibility, his family was evicted from their home; the only relatives who may have been able to offer financial or housing assistance were living in Mexico. The girls and their parents bounced around from apartment to apartment, going wherever their parents could afford. And each move brought with it a new school. Despite the unwavering devotion of their parents to strong educations for their daughters, and despite the incredible critical thinking skills and curiosity each girl possessed, each transfer brought the girls farther and farther behind in their academic skills. Of course, students also missed school to attend family celebrations, to rejoice in religious holidays, to attend the funeral of a grandparent in another country, or because they had a fever. But the number of missed school days that could be avoidable in a middle- or upper-class neighborhood was astounding.

Hearing all of these stories, I confronted truths I was only beginning to understand. I recognized that addressing students' mindsets as a prerequisite to teaching academic skills would require direct dialogue about our situation: culturally, racially, and economically, my students and I shared little in common. Even though I was ready to learn and work harder than I ever thought possible to give them the education they deserved, they had no proof that this was true.

Truly, I didn't know where to start. As a young, White, Jewish woman with no track record of student success (actually, no track record at all), what made me qualified to undertake this task? How would I convince kids that I believed in them? Was it biased to question whether they would trust me? I had entered the classroom with an arrogant and ignorant sense that I would "save" kids who had been deserted by an unfair system, but I didn't stay there for long. I made it my mission to learn as much as possible. I didn't yet know that my students and their families could themselves be sources of knowledge and wisdom, but I sought the advice of more veteran colleagues, who introduced me to eye-opening pedagogical theories about teaching children of color living in poverty.

It was at this time that I began to learn about modern day prejudice. I read Gloria Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2009), which taught me about the danger of being "colorblind"—seeing only children and not the colors of their skin—because such a "dysconsciousness" unintentionally preserves the status quo of bias and discrimination in America. Instead, teachers must aim to open dialogue about how race and other forms of difference impact individuals. I studied Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children:*

Cultural Conflict in the Classroom (1995), which allowed me to question: if I am White and my students are not, how does this difference impact our classroom? For good or bad, race permeates every interaction between students and me. And, as Delpit asserts, the cultural differences between my students and me can create an atmosphere in which we do not understand each other. This misunderstanding might, in turn, lead to teaching that invalidates students' cultures, assumes specific types of authority that do not mesh with my students' ideas of authority, or lacks instruction of the specific skills and "cultural capital"—what Delpit calls "codes of power"—to which I have access but many of my students do not. I explored Beverly Daniel Tatum's *"Why Are All the Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* (2003), which introduced to me to the metaphor of breathing in the "smog" of racism that has existed throughout American history.

I would later come across a wealth of diversity and inclusiveness scholarship. I engaged with the theory of racial identity development put forth by Beverly Tatum and summarized by the Interaction Institute for Social Change and made connections to my own life that allowed me to better understand various childhood and adolescent experiences. Sue's (2010) ideas about the existence and impact of microaggressions brought to consciousness ways in which I had experienced microaggressions in my gender, religion, and sexual orientation, and also instances in which I had perpetrated microaggressions as a White, upper-middle-class person. I began to notice how these subtle occurrences permeated society and my school. I applied Claude M. Steele's (2011) concept of stereotype threat to my analysis of test data to determine the extent to which, in my estimation, the data for certain students belied their actual academic abilities. And I even examined my own classroom management system to determine whether stereotype threat was at play in other less concrete situations besides testing. Was my classroom atmosphere more rewarding of the quiet demeanor of a Latina girl than of a more vocal Black boy, for example? Could my reactions in the classroom be a result of implicit bias? A result of cultural differences? A microaggression? I didn't have answers, but believed I was beginning to ask the right questions. I did not immediately identify or interrupt all of my personal biases, but I did begin to turn around on Tatum's "moving walkway" of racism—racism that is perpetuated in our society simply by maintaining the status quo. It would be years before I felt like I started to actively move in the opposite direction.

Probably far sooner than I was adequately prepared for, I started talking to my students about the achievement gap. I engaged my students in an interactive PowerPoint titled "How Did I Get Here?" that synthesized information from Jonathan Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (2005), which examines the breadth and depth of the achievement gap in America. We talked about institutionalized racism, inequitable school funding, the weight of poverty, test bias, lack of political clout, media-perpetuated stereotypes, school system structures and practices, and society's low expectations. I wish my PowerPoint had included probing discussion questions that more specifically targeted our cultural differences and how those differences impacted how I taught

and students learned in the classroom, but alas, I was still learning. Although I'm sure many kids were uninspired by this discussion, several were invested in an understanding of why their skills were sub-par, but that their intelligence and academic potential were not.

But the demystification of the achievement gap wasn't enough. Understanding why my students underachieved did not give them faith that they could feel smarter. To do that, I had to begin by revealing that the achievement gap—really an opportunity and an expectations gap—consisted of several smaller gaps: a vocabulary gap, a number-of-books-read gap, and a schema/knowledge gap, to name a few. With confidence that was questionably warranted, I then presented another interactive PowerPoint, titled "Why Read?" that explicated how the achievement gap among students impacts them as adults. 40 % of adult Americans experience difficulty interpreting basic documents such as bus schedules, election ballots, apartment leases, and employment contracts. It then cited statistics on the number of words students must read to reach one year's growth: 1.1 million words a year of outside-school reading + 1.7 million words a year of inside-school reading. The average seventh grader reads only about 900,000 words per year.

The kids were terrified—probably not out of shock, but out of the reality that they could be on the lower end of these statistics. I felt as though I had done the opposite of what I had intended: I wanted my students to feel more confident in themselves—these skills, after all, were learnable—but they ended up feeling less. As teachers, we probably all have moments in which we believe we have made royal mistakes in what we've said to students. This was one of those moments for me. Once again, I had focused exclusively on student deficits and society's low expectations without balancing these realities with a contradictory, but equally important, counter-narrative: my students *did* possess a lot of academic skills and *were* held to high expectations by their families. Although I was still not ready to engage in honest dialogue about how our differences impacted our classroom, I did realize that if I changed my own narrative about my students of color growing up in poverty, capitalizing on their strengths and advantages, the narrative of my students could change, as well.

Although these abstract conversations were ongoing, the day-to-day of my classroom focused on content and skill acquisition. My students needed to read and write at a college-ready level. Given the wide range of literacy levels in the room, there was simply no way I could adopt a one-size-fits-all curriculum. I had little expertise on how to approach such a daunting task as differentiation, so again, I relied on those more veteran than me for assistance. I tried some of the techniques they suggested: previewing the texts with some students, teaching relevant vocabulary in advance, identifying the few parts of a passage to closely dissect with students, etc. But with my limited skill and lack of confidence in my assessments, I had no way of knowing the degree to which these strategies were successful in improving literacy in my classroom.

One thing I did know was that I needed to build a library. There were no bookstores within a two-mile radius of my school, most homes in the neighborhood did not possess computers with which to read books online, and the local library

was a hangout spot for homeless people seeking air conditioning as a refuge from the Los Angeles heat, which meant that many students' parents did not let their children go there. This was one way in which I could use my economic privilege as an advantage: to serve this need, I could leverage my own book collection and my own resources. I asked my parents to pack up my own bookshelves filled with middle and high school books and ship them across the country. I asked for student volunteers to help label and sort the books by genre. (It was those who asserted the loudest complaints about, but the deepest gratitude for, the about high academic and behavioral expectations who volunteered to help after school.) I gave a mini-lesson on the "five-finger rule" (students count the number of unknown words on a page to determine whether a book is an appropriate difficulty level for them) and about how to properly care for books. I instituted a rule in which students had to kiss books that fell on the floor—books were considered sacred. Students completed "work-study applications" for the job of class librarian, who assisted his/her peers in the book checkout process and made sure the book recommendation cards were neatly placed into the corresponding folder.

I also organized a book drive through my home synagogue. A box was placed inside the synagogue entrance with a note explaining the purpose of collecting books. More than thirty boxes of books arrived. Folks from my community donated encyclopedias, bestsellers, nursery school collections, and everything in between. My father made several trips between his home and the synagogue to move them all to his garage, where they were stored until I was able to sort through and categorize them. In retrospect, even though it was a grand idea and yielded hundreds of books for my classroom collection, it was a gigantic missed opportunity: I could have involved the kids in running a more local book drive. Among other tasks they would have to coordinate, they could have reached out to various local organizations to find a space for running the drive, thus becoming more knowledgeable of and actively involved in utilizing community resources. This, in turn, would have achieved three goals: obtaining books, authentic practice engaging with local professionals, and actively validating the value of their community.

Once our classroom was filled with books of multiple genres at multiple levels, I needed to present strong literacy instruction. I started implementing some of the strategies I had learned through my TFA training and from veteran colleagues. Discussions of literature revealed that, although students often exhibited deep understanding of literary themes, they struggled to access some textual nuances and to articulate their ideas with appropriate vocabulary. I needed to offer direct vocabulary instruction. I brainstormed and implemented a few ideas, largely reinventing the wheel when there was no need to.

Although students learn the vast majority of new words simply from reading, direct vocabulary instruction is also valuable, particularly in a class with English Language Learners. But doing so needs to be interesting and in-context. While my students learned morphemes, we engaged in an activity in which students invented their own words and definitions by combining morphemes. Our favorite was "multi-sub-hydro-capit-ism" ("the system by which a multi-headed creature lives under water"). We drew a picture of this bizarre beast and hung it on the wall. We

kept word walls (which we rotated with each new unit), competed in vocabulary contests (students earned a point with each vocabulary word successfully used in class discussion), and "killed" overused and clichéd words, burying them in a Dead Word Cemetery ("tombstones" contained synonyms to be used in place of the "dead" word). Before approaching *Romeo and Juliet*, I provided a list of Shakespearean words divided into three columns: adjective, adjective, noun. Students wandered around the room shouting insults at each other, (my silly, but fun attempt at demystifying Shakespearean language). And naturally, when possible and appropriate, we made comparisons to Spanish for those scholars who speak the language, which validated their own language while building background knowledge for acquiring new information. I did not yet know about teaching shades of meaning, usage rules, or word families, but systematizing vocabulary instruction was a good start.

I taught explicit lessons on monitoring reading comprehension to demonstrate that reading is an "eyes + brain" task. Students kept interactive bookmarks tracking examples of literary devices; they auditioned for roles in *Zoot Suit*; they rewrote scenes of Greek and Roman myths imagining different gender expectations; they wrote "newspaper articles" about a single event in *Speak* from different characters' perspectives; we played games like Four Corners and Agree/Disagree; we played my students' favorite game, "Stump Ms. Reich," in which students had to stump me with questions about minute details from a text.

With my students engaged in the material and bought into the idea that I believed genuinely in their potential, I saw my classroom as successful. In retrospect, I needed more feedback, I needed to observe more colleagues, and I needed a way to assess whether my work was actually impacting student achievement, among other needs. But my classroom had potential. I had started the journey toward becoming a gap-closing teacher.

Inspired by my students' growing investment in my class within the first few months of my teaching, I felt more empowered to work with students on an individual level. Ernesto was the student furthest behind in my class. He struggled to decode words and had limited recognition of many basic sight words usually mastered in elementary school. As a secondary school educator, however, I had never been educated in teaching phonics. I obtained a few resources from friends who taught elementary school and implemented what I thought was decent instruction. Truthfully, I'm not confident that it was my instruction that enabled Ernesto to improve his reading level by four years by June, or whether it was simply showing up to school at 7 a.m. twice a week, ready to teach if he was ready to learn. Some days, he arrived panting and sweating from having been chased by a wild dog on his thirteen-block walk to school; some days, he couldn't focus because he was stressed about his older brother's gang affiliation; some days, he was able to focus right away. He spoke often of his mother's confidence in him. She told him every day that his hard work would pay off and that he would go down the path that she had intended for him. She told him every day that she was proud of him. She knew he was smart and that his skills could match his intelligence. Once Ernesto got a taste of success, having increased his vocabulary and improved his fluency, he

worked incredibly hard for the rest of the year, growing nearly four academic years in those short months. At the time, I credited myself with Ernesto's success, but more than likely, it was his mother and his own self-motivation that contributed more than anything else.

As excited as I was to be part of Ernesto's successes, there were some students to whom I gave a disproportionate amount of attention who did not meet with such success. Yesica presented a particularly puzzling case. Adding interesting thoughts to class discussion, always completing her homework, and consistently following my directions, Yesica did not outwardly appear to struggle in my class. Unfortunately, I realized several months into the school year that her positive and hard-working demeanor were a cover for her incredibly low reading skills. For Yesica, reading fluently and being able to discuss what she'd read were a struggle. Convinced that fluency was a barrier to her comprehension and therefore needed to be tackled first, she and I practiced reading an on-level text aloud twice a week during lunch. We reread portions of text so that she could understand what reading fluently feels like fluently and saw relatively quick improvements in the elements of fluent reading: expression, pace, and accuracy.

When I started asking Yesica comprehension questions, however, her answers were imprecise, vague, and oftentimes simply incorrect. I tried pausing every few sentences to ask a question. I let her read longer portions of text before asking her a question. I changed the types of questions I was asking from inferential questions to literal comprehension questions and was still met with inaccurate answers. When I asked Yesica whether she knew that quotation marks indicated dialogue and what a period represents, she knew all the right answers. Then, I thought maybe the barrier was not in her input (what she was taking in while reading) but in her output (needing to express what she'd learned), so I started asking her multiple-choice questions. She would not have to produce anything, but rather recognize a truth from what she'd read; she correctly answered most of those questions! But asking her to write or verbally communicate what she'd read using her own words yielded the same problems as before. Was it a vocabulary gap? An "organization of thought" gap? I didn't know.

With three months remaining in her freshman year, the possibility that Yesica would drop out of school was palpable: her sister had dropped out and become a cosmetologist, a trade that seemed appealing to Yesica—certainly one that she could feel successful at. But conversations with colleagues about student motivation had led me to believe that all students would finish school if they could do so while preserving their sense of self-worth. Yesica believed she was stupid; after all, she was working hard and still not meeting with success. But no matter how much I pointed out all the ways she was smart, she simply didn't see proof of this intelligence while she was reading. Too overwhelmed by trying to meet the demands of students whose needs were so vastly different, I simply did the best I could for Yesica. I never figured out what, exactly, blocked her comprehension, and even though I gave her tenth grade teachers all the tips I could for how Yesica could succeed, I couldn't help but think, at the end of the year, that I had failed her. If only I had recognized her struggles earlier. If only I had found a way to collaborate with

her middle school teachers to see what strategies they had tried. If only I had sought help from the Special Education staff at my school to determine other strategies I could use—or perhaps refer her to be evaluated. But I didn't do those things, and it breaks my heart.

By the time spring break rolled around, I was feeling the pressure that revolved around standardized testing. Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West have edited a collection of essays titled *No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability* (2003) that addresses this issue. In one essay, "Refining or Retreating? High-Stakes Accountability in the States," Frederick M. Hess explains that the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was meant to increase accountability for schools. Hess outlines the pressures and problems of standardized exams. He points to the difficulties in bringing kids to meet the standards of the state when they often enter the classroom several years behind in their skills. Emphasizing test scores means that teachers can be tempted to teach to the test, thus minimizing their control over their curricula to respond to the specific differentiation students need. Teachers of all subjects besides mathematics and English may feel marginalized by their schools, since many states only test those two subjects. Students themselves also experience intense anxiety around performing highly on these exams, particularly if a school includes passing the state exam among the promotional criteria. I believed that the idea of increased accountability was a step towards leveling the playing field for all students throughout the country, yet I'd also heard innumerable criticisms of NCLB. Not having previously been well informed of how these pressures would manifest themselves in my classroom, nor feeling adequately prepared to meet these challenges, I certainly felt an abstract anxiety I did not know how to assuage.

At first, I hung the state reading and writing standards on the wall with duct tape, as we had no bulletin boards. Daily and formative assessments were a hallmark of my TFA learning, so I began a system of regularly assessing the students' mastery of each individual standard. I invested time in teaching and assessing students' ability to write essays that established a "controlling impression" and "coherence within and among paragraphs." I taught and assessed students on their ability to analyze the relevance of the setting of a text on its "mood, tone, and meaning" and how a text's literary devices can be used to "interpret the work." These assessments yielded inconsistent data from day to day, from student to student, and from text to text. What was I doing wrong?

Perhaps the idea of teaching a standard and assessing student mastery of that standard was inherently flawed. After all, a student could understand setting in one text and miss the deeper symbolic meaning of setting in another. A student who could write an essay that established a controlling impression probably also had a grasp of how to create coherence among paragraphs, and a student who could not do the former probably could not do the latter. Mastery of reading and writing skills does not happen standard by standard. Strong readers are likely able to perform highly on numerous reading standards, demonstrating skills in individual standards, but I could not teach individual standards in isolation and expect students to become strong holistic readers.

I could count on one hand the number of conversations I'd had with my principal all year, including one in which I had to explain that he was mispronouncing my name, but a week before the California Standards Test (CST), he described to me just how important the test results were. He didn't provide any specifics, but the pressure was certainly on. When the results came in during the summer, I was proud that my students earned the highest rate of proficiency in the school, demonstrating 80 % mastery of the state standards. Although I like to think that my instruction itself played a large role in their successes, I think it could be much more accurately credited to my ability to invest students in their own learning, to their families' dedication, and, obviously, to their own hard work. Students rise to the bar that is set for them. Maintaining rigorous academic expectations while infusing basic skills into daily instruction makes a difference on state performance measures as well as internal measures for college-ready skills.

Apart from the pressures of standardized testing, I was determined to provide as strong a curriculum as possible. In each unit, I wanted to read one novel as a class and have all students read an additional on-level novel in small groups via literature circles—an idea that I thought was nontraditional but was actually a common strategy for differentiation taught in many teacher education programs. For the shared novel, I had lofty goals: I wanted to read what I understood to be the classics: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Inherit the Wind*, *Romeo and Juliet*, etc. I hadn't unpacked what Peggy McIntosh (1998) calls the "invisible knapsack" of White privilege. I had always been provided with curricular materials and courses that celebrated people of my race, texts I read implicitly supported the type of family in which I grew up, and people of my race were regularly represented in discussions of current events in the classroom. I planned to teach what I knew, and these books had been included in my own ninth grade curriculum.

Thankfully, one of my classes in my master's program exposed me to the existence and necessity of a culturally proficient curriculum. Although one graduate course does not an expert make, my eyes were opened to concepts that I continued to research and incorporate throughout my subsequent years of teaching. Newly aware of some of the unearned privileges my race had provided, I realized that my students would not be able to see themselves positively reflected in the curriculum I was providing for them. As a White teacher who cared enormously for her students and their futures, I needed to work against Tatum's "moving walkway" of racism, sexism, and other -isms to create an actively anti-prejudiced classroom. If schools act as microcosms of society, reflecting and reinforcing the biases of society at large, I needed to create a curriculum that challenged the status quo and effected social change.

As Style (1988) postulates, any curriculum should provide both a window into other worlds and a mirror of their own. Students who live in any part of America, in any situation, must learn about what life is like elsewhere. And they must be given the tools to articulate their own experiences and enlighten their perspectives on the circumstances impacting their own lives. Building this knowledge and instilling Gandhi's idea that we must be the change we wished to see were the central tenants I began to adopt in crafting a multicultural, culturally inclusive, anti-prejudiced classroom.

But I faced a major problem: my own academic background contained gigantic gaps, as I had largely been steeped in Euro-centric literature. So I did what I could to start making changes immediately: I invited family members of my students to discuss their careers with students, I decorated the room with positive images of the heritages reflected in my classroom, and became conscious to use inclusive language (such as "he/she" when discussing a president or "parents or guardians" when sending letters home). I created a Poetic Identity Anthology, in which students interviewed people of similar and different cultures as their own and wrote poems from the interviewees' perspectives. Naturally, they had to meet certain criteria revolving around poetic devices, voice, perspective, and character development in their creation of these poems. Natalie, an eighth grader of Puerto Rican and Brazilian descent, incorporated her knowledge of Spanish and Portuguese into a poem she titled "Who Am I, If Not Myself?" Other students chose to write poems about historical events and cultural concepts, such as governmental challenges in Guatemala and fighting for *la raza*, to enrich their poems. But I mostly spent the next several months getting caught up on literature to which I'd previously had little exposure, reading works by Chinua Achebe, Sandra Cisneros, Deborah Ellis, Toni Morrison, Pablo Neruda, Gary Soto, Alice Walker, Elie Wiesel, Jade Snow Wong, Gene Luen Yang, and Markus Zusak, to name only a few. These were the "windows" I offered starting in my second year of teaching, though some books, obviously, were windows for some scholars and mirrors for others.

My confidence was limited in providing my students with a "mirror" into their lives. Since I did not see what they saw when they looked in the mirror, I had to be humble enough to know that my hypotheses for the images they saw might not be accurate and cautious enough to avoid perpetuating stereotypes. I wanted to help my students interrupt their narratives that the primary experiences of people of color were restricted to those about oppression or disadvantage. So I proposed various alternate images and allowed them to dictate the direction of their educations.

In one project, I provided the names of a few notable professionals from their families' countries of origin and invited them to research those who had made the most notable contributions to their homelands. Rosario argued that Juan Montalvo, one of the most famous Ecuadorian writers of the nineteenth century, had a greater influence on his country than scientist Eugenia Del Pino or President Rafael Correa. Her rationale lay in her assertion that Montalvo focused his literary works on important values of the time, including freedom, democracy, and the rights of women, and brought literary legitimacy to Ecuador, whereas Pino's contributions to evolution and embryonic development were not as far-reaching and Correa's reduction of poverty was balanced by authoritarianism, nepotism, and limits on free speech. This project required college-style research and scholar evaluation, and it legitimized Ecuador as a country worthy of curricular inclusion and established a narrative that Ecuadorians can provide extensive contributions to society-at-large. Of course, crafting these projects required a depth and breadth of knowledge about my students' cultures and countries of origin that I didn't possess until I made it my mission to do so. Hours upon hours of research were difficult and exhausting, but the rewards were well worth the energy.

My efforts in building a culturally proficient curriculum were made easier by the wealth of experiences these teenagers brought to my classroom that enriched our learning and cultural community. My students entered school having been steeped in the principles of hard work, dedication, pride, loyalty, and integrity. Such ethics helped them achieve in literacy. Once I learned how to tap into these values, scholar investment and performance soared. In discussions about empowerment, I challenged their desires to "escape" their neighborhoods. Wanting to leave falsely implies that their communities fail to offer them positive experiences. Additionally, I asked, "If you go off to college and never look back, who will still be here in ten years?" Their families, friends, and neighbors. What more powerful thing to do and who better to tackle the hardships their communities face than them? Who knows the challenges better than they do? I never aimed to imply that they must all return to their neighborhoods after college. Rather, I intended to show that problems don't get fixed unless someone fixes them. In this way, I hope my classroom became a hub for social justice beginnings, as Sonia Nieto describes in *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (2011).

Naturally, a curriculum that aims to inspire social change must be accompanied by an education in the less tangible skills that are essential for attaining success in America. Children growing up in low-income neighborhoods must learn how to operate within what Lisa Delpit calls "codes of power" (1995). My students often lack fundamental knowledge about the road to college, college itself, and the professional world beyond college. Many don't know about course requirements, the college application process, SATs, or options for financial aid and scholarships. They don't know about on- and off-campus living, obtaining a tutor for a difficult course, or the difference between a major and a minor. And they don't know what to wear to a job interview or how to greet a boss with a handshake and eye contact. My students are often the first in their families to attend four-year universities and may not know many people with professional careers. However, 100 % of students living in high poverty communities can learn this information through direct instruction. In my first teaching job, the school required students to dress professionally every Tuesday in order to illustrate professional attire. I stood at the door each morning—as usual—but instead of giving me a fist-pump before entering the classroom, they would give me a professional handshake, a "Good morning, ma'am," and eye contact. This simple routine taught students "codes of power" they would need for job interviews and professional work environments. Small efforts like these can make a big difference in teaching students the unwritten rules of the professional world.

These learning experiences have influenced my beliefs about being an educator in a high-poverty community. It is widely acknowledged that Black and Latino students at every income bracket underperform compared to their White and Asian peers. Countless theorists have asserted reasons for why this gap exists, and several have delineated strategies teachers can use in the classroom that will raise the performance of students of color to meet their potentials. Authors like Lisa Delpit, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Doug Lemov, H. Richard Milner IV, Sonia Nieto, Mica Pollock,

Jon Saphier, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Franita Ware, and others have outlined methods for achieving success with students in these neighborhoods. Students, especially students of color from low-income households, are school-dependent; their schooling plays a significant factor in their life outcomes. No matter how many years of teaching I have under my belt, I will never stop learning so that every student who enters my classroom can depend on me to provide a great education.

4 The Impact

Often when I tell people I'm a teacher they'll say, "Oh, that must be so rewarding." And it absolutely is. I may not have felt adequately prepared to enter a high school classroom in South Central, Los Angeles, and there are certainly changes I might make to the way TFA operates, but joining TFA provided a gateway for entering a world I am so grateful to have entered.

Now, nearly a decade into my career as an educator, I learn more from my students than I could ever have imagined. I learn other perspectives and expand my own worldview while listening to my eighth graders' interpretations of a book I'd read ten times. When I bump into Kevin, who has already been traveling for over an hour on the subway from his group home in the Bronx, I learn about dedication. When Beatriz and Ashley—two students I try to seat on opposite sides of the room—approach me together and say, "We'd like peer mediation. Are you available to oversee after school today?" I learn about conflict resolution. When two high-performing students request to work with Justin—a student with learning challenges—on a group project, I learn about compassion and empathy. When Jamyrah asks to be tutored at recess, I learn about advocacy and hard work.

I learn to challenge my own ideas about race, poverty, and privilege. The idea of being a hero for these kids is long gone. They have heroes all around them: their parents and guardians who work long hours to provide for their families, who go back to school in their forties to get their college degrees, who sacrifice their own dreams and ambitions to give their children advantages they never had, and who push their children farther than they ever thought they could go. Their ministers, soccer coaches, church choir directors, neighbors, cousins—they provide models of hard work, integrity, and unwavering support for these children's futures.

And of course, I learn about hope. Jimmy—my student who had given up on himself long before stepping foot into my classroom, whose grandmother visited our classroom at the end of every day to check on his progress, who thought he was too far behind to graduate high school—received his acceptance letter to the University of Washington in April 2011. Change is possible if we are humble enough to learn from our colleagues and the families of our students, if we see our students for the brilliance they possess, if we refuse to settle for underperformance, if we are willing to give them the most rigorous material we can dream up, if we believe in the depths of our souls that our children will succeed. Change is possible.

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Unpacking Teachers' Narratives: Dimensions of Social Equity Teaching Revealed

Althier M. Lazar

Abstract The narratives of the five teachers are analyzed in relation to the perspectives on teacher development and social equity teaching presented in chapter "A Cause Beyond Ourselves". Teachers' social-justice leanings and their interest in urban teaching were shaped across a variety of activity settings over time. These orientations were further developed in their teacher-education programs. The narratives provide a window into how teachers then brought these inclinations to their classrooms, revealing their (1) understandings about the sociocultural and sociopolitical factors shaping their students' lives; (2) enactments of culturally responsive, sustaining, and critical literacy teaching; (3) recognition of students' diverse language and literacy abilities and efforts to balance literacy skill teaching with holistic approaches; (4) advocacy and activism; and (5) caring with political clarity. The analysis helps to inform an agenda for preparing and supporting teachers in underserved communities.

Keywords Expansive development · Factors leading to urban education · Social equity teaching · Social justice orientations

1 Introduction

What do the narratives tell us about the experiences of these five teachers? They reveal some of the life events that oriented them toward social equity work, and specifically, urban teaching. The narratives show how teachers interpreted understandings about social justice and culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms in the midst of managing the most intense learning of their professional lives. This chapter highlights their different thoughts and actions in relation to the ideas

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presented in chapter "A Cause Beyond Ourselves"—namely what their experiences communicate about teacher development in relation to some of the key principles of social equity literacy teaching.

2 The Influence of Homes, Schools and Communities

Drawing from an expansive, horizontal view of learning and development (Gutiérrez and Larson 2007), each teacher described her development in relation to a variety of different activity settings including participating in charity work, reading texts in college, doing mission work, volunteering in schools, participating in university seminars, and working with colleagues in their schools. All described activity settings that fostered their realizations about social injustices and propelled them toward urban teaching.

A few teachers shared their earliest memories of the life events that fostered their interest in teaching. Leslie's involvement in religious and charity work and Clare's interactions with youth at a juvenile detention center provided them with early exposure to the realities of people beyond their communities. Rachael and Megan recalled events from their teen years that they believed shaped their future leanings. Megan participated in many service trips that allowed her to spend time in economically stressed communities.

They all discussed discomforting moments that precipitated reflection about their own educational privileges. In college, Rachael first rejected the idea that her family was privileged after reading Jamaica Kincaid's arresting words, but then, after much reflection, she gradually accepted this notion. She studied issues of poverty and international economics from the perspectives of those in developing nations.

Tracie constructed understandings about educational inequality by visiting her godmother's school. She was able to compare her own rich educational opportunities with the limited opportunities provided to students in this urban school, an experience that prompted her to wonder, "*Why does someone that's Brown or poor or living in an underserved community have to get 'lucky' to receive a rigorous, high quality education?*" This question shaped her desire to continue her family legacy as an urban educator.

Exposure to social equity-oriented teacher education programs allowed the teachers to fortify an orientation toward social-justice work that had already been established. Teacher education programs became channels through which teachers formulated theories and developed skills for their work in urban schools. For the traditionally educated students like Clare and Megan, teacher education programs provided some uncomfortable experiences and trials that led them to consider urban teaching careers.

Clare's long-term urban school internship and specifically encounters with a young Black student led her to scrutinize her own White privilege. She concluded, "*I was the White authority figure coming on to her turf to try and do right, but I was not educated as she was. I did not know the code she knew as a young Black female*

born and raised in Southwest Philly. So how do you cross that bridge? How do you merge worlds that at times seem further apart than galaxies?" As a cultural outsider in this community, Clare tried to bridge the gap between herself and her students by finding elements of popular culture (singing, dancing, television shows) that her students might relate to. She figured out that what seemed to matter most was consistency—she came to the school week after week in an attempt to establish positive, mutually respectful relationships with her students. This allowed her to envision a future as an urban teacher.

While at SJU, Megan's many service trips throughout the country helped her form understandings about social inequalities. Reading Jonathan Kozol's work in her first education course prompted her to compare her own advantaged educational experiences with those in many of the Philadelphia classrooms where she interned, prompting her to consider urban education as a career:

> The students of upper-middle-class Cherry Hill thrive in schools with the most up-to-date technology, while the neighboring poor and crime-stricken city of Camden can barely afford fire alarms and toilet paper. How was this fair? How could this happen? Who was doing something about this? The fire in me had been ignited, and I knew urban public education was my passion.

While Leslie and Tracie did not attend undergraduate education courses that addressed the history of schooling and educational inequalities, they were exposed to ideas about social inequality in their undergraduate programs and later while participating in their graduate programs. Tracie, who initially majored in music education, was discouraged from pursuing the major when an education professor insulted students in the underserved neighborhoods where she wanted to intern. Teach For America gave her an opportunity to fulfill her dream of being an urban educator without having to be in a program that denigrated students who she characterized as being like herself.

Leslie had already established social-justice leanings well before she investigated TFA and had envisioned the possibilities of teaching before speaking to recruiters. The unsettling information she received from TFA recruiters propelled her to think seriously about teaching in urban schools:

> I was shocked by the statistics with which I was presented: only one in three children growing up in poverty will graduate from high school and only nine percent will earn a bachelor's degree by age 25. I was inspired to fulfill what I viewed as the ultimate mitzvah: teaching in a high-poverty community. As someone with much, I would give to those with too little.

Leslie, Clare, and Tracie recalled events from their youth that guided them toward urban education. These included service trips (Megan), spending time visiting urban classrooms (Tracie, Clare), and being exposed to social and educational inequalities while in college (Rachael, Megan, Clare, Leslie). Their experiences are consistent with research that shows that teachers who have had prior experiences with underserved and diverse communities are more likely to begin teaching with the sociocultural understandings needed to teach successfully in these communities than those who do not (Garmon 2005; Haberman 2005).

3 The Impact of Teacher Education

As TFA corps members, Leslie and Tracie began teaching with a modicum of pedagogical knowledge and teaching experience. Unlike their traditionally credentialed peers, both teachers shared their doubts about their teaching abilities. Leslie wrote that she had "little expertise" to differentiate instruction, "limited skill," and a "lack of confidence" in assessing students. She also stated that she lacked understandings about teaching shades of meaning, grammar usage rules, and word families. Leslie put to use the knowledge she gained from TFA and a cadre of experienced colleagues in her first year of teaching. In reflecting on this experience, she lamented that there was so much to know and do:

> In retrospect, I needed more feedback, I needed to observe more colleagues, and I needed a way to assess whether my work was actually impacting student achievement, among other needs. But my classroom had potential. I had started the journey toward becoming a gap-closing teacher.

Tracie's initial discovery that her students had not learned much in her first four months of teaching left her feeling that she had failed her students. In response, she focused on what on what she could do to turn this outcome around: "*I humbled myself to ask for help and to accept whatever thoughts, resources, or advice I could use.*"

Among the five teachers, Clare had completed the most teacher education credits when she began to teach, having obtained undergraduate and graduate degrees in elementary education, special education, and reading. In addition, she had volunteered in the same Philadelphia school for a period of four years. Clare brought her knowledge and skills to Phoenix, where she was able to put aside the literature anthology provided for her and instead draw from children's literature and students' lives to create a curriculum that mirrored the experiences and heritage of her students. Although Clare accepted this challenge, she worked on seeing the contexts of her students' cultural backpacks.

Megan received an undergraduate degree in education but did not feel adequately prepared to support her students' varied language needs: "*How was I supposed to apply skills meant for decoding words and sounds for a kindergartener to nearly my entire fourth-grade class, while also teaching the curriculum and preparing my students for the state standardized tests?*" Despite having earned an undergraduate degree in education, she felt there was so much more to know about how to develop students' literacy abilities.

Rachael presented a great deal of confidence in her teaching. She had spent time working in the school as a volunteer prior to accepting a full-time teaching position there, allowing her to become acclimated to the school's culture. In addition, Rachael began her teaching career later in life than the other teachers, after having worked at a university and a fundraising office. She also worked in a school that provided a great deal of support. She was assigned to a partner teacher who was credentialed in the area of working with emergent bilingual students. Rachael also benefitted from being able to participate in weekly grade level meetings with her peers.

The narratives indicate that the TFA corps members, Leslie and Tracie, were most insecure about their pedagogical knowledge when beginning their professional practices and believed that this undermined their students' learning. Their experiences reflect the research on alternatively certified teachers who tend to have greater difficulties planning curriculum, teaching, and diagnosing students' learning needs than those who are fully credentialed (Darling-Hammond 2000). Leslie and Tracie, however, were focused on accelerating their professional growth for the sake of their students. By seeking help from peers, reading the professional literature, and mostly learning on the job, they gradually gained enough knowledge and skill to experience some degree of success in their first year of teaching. These circumstances allowed them to move beyond thinking through how to implement instruction so they could focus more on meeting the complex cultural and language needs of their students.

Most of these teachers discussed how their social justice leanings were developed in their teacher education (TEP) programs. Megan discussed course readings about educational inequalities, and Clare referred to her TEP program when she described her own racial identity and the sociopolitical positioning of her students. Rachael attributed her enhanced understandings about poverty to her undergraduate experiences, but she also noted that she had looked for a graduate program with a strong social-justice mission.

4 The Impact of Schools

The teachers were subjected to different levels of influence from a central district office, which shaped their ability to make decisions and derive satisfaction from their work. Further, the teachers offered varied descriptions about how much support they received, from being highly supported, consistent with their instructional ideas (Rachael, Clare), to the opposite (Megan).

Compared to the other teachers, Megan and Tracie did not have as much control in their instructional decision-making. They taught in neighborhood public schools and were both expected to follow strict literacy-teaching routines. Tracie felt pressured to spend considerable time preparing her students for standardized tests. Having to teach in ways that were inconsistent with their beliefs produced tensions they could not endure; both left these schools to seek other opportunities in urban education. Tracie's situation was more complicated, however. While she was disillusioned by the limitations of scripted teaching and preparing her students for high-stakes tests, she also appreciated her school's strong mentorship program for first- and second-year teachers.

Leslie also discussed high-stakes testing and did much to structure her curriculum around ensuring that her students mastered curriculum standards. She indicated that her principal emphasized the importance of standardized test results but provided little assistance with how to help her students perform well on them. Leslie did not, however, discuss limitations imposed on her instructional

decision-making. Rather, she appeared to have many opportunities to make instructional decisions.

Rachael, in a charter school, was asked to implement a school-wide discipline plan and use a workshop model for reading and writing instruction. Yet these practices fit with her beliefs about creating positive environments, providing clear guidelines for behavior, and authentic literacy instruction. As discussed earlier, Rachael thrived in a team-oriented and collegial atmosphere and felt very positive about the school.

Clare described her principal as a "free rein kind of lady" who supported her decision to put aside the literature anthology and plan her own lessons. Clare believed she had established a strong reputation in the school in just a few months and this contributed to her principal's faith in her abilities: "*She knew I was teaching, she knew I had a handle on one of the rowdiest bunches in the school, and she knew I was passionate about my work.*" Partly as a consequence of working in a private Catholic school, and because she taught young children, Clare was not involved in preparing her students for standardized tests. Clare also received support from her Spanish-speaking assistant teacher.

Each teacher's history with underserved communities exemplifies the unique and sometimes contrary nature of expansive learning. Clare's experience as a volunteer in an urban school is a good example. What she learned in this setting (learning to gain the respect of students) contrasted with what she took from her teacher education program (theories and practices related to educational inequalities, racial identity development, using culturally responsive literature, critical literacy). As discussed in the next section, the uncomfortable activity settings that precipitated her learning prior to teaching were qualitatively different from the learning that took place in her first year of teaching when she made discoveries about the realities of undocumented caregivers, the social issues affecting the community, and discovering how to use culturally sustaining literature in critical ways.

5 Degrees of Teaching for Social Equity

All of the teachers wanted to make a difference, but their understandings about what that meant varied. To capture this variation, I will refer to many of the dimensions of social equity teaching discussed in chapter "A Cause Beyond Ourselves" that fuse literacy instruction with elements of culturally responsive/sustaining, social justice teaching, and critical caring. It is important to point out that the teachers were not asked to write about their work in relation to specific dimensions of social equity teaching. They were asked write broadly about how they evolved to become urban teachers, their beliefs about teaching, their literacy teaching practices, how they taught with culture in mind, the obstacles they faced and how they approached them, and why they continued to pursue this work. My crafting of the writing task did not tap into the full range of ways they may have acted in accord with social

equity principles, and so I will refrain from making assertions about the degree to which they acted as social justice teachers or cared with political clarity (Valenzuela 1999). It is possible, however, to identify each teacher's beliefs, practices, struggles, and advocacy efforts in relation to the concepts of social equity literacy teaching that surfaced in their narratives.

As it turned out, the narratives reflected many dimensions of social equity literacy teaching including teachers' (1) understandings about the sociocultural and sociopolitical factors shaping their students' lives; (2) enactments of culturally responsive, sustaining, and critical literacy teaching practices; (3) recognition of students' diverse language and literacy abilities and efforts to balance literacy skill teaching with holistic approaches; (4) advocacy and activism; and (5) caring with political clarity. While the teachers' narratives reveal many examples of social equity literacy teaching, their beliefs and actions should not be taken as exemplars of the social equity frameworks discussed in this book. None of them declared themselves to be "teachers for social justice" or indicated that they had mastered teaching in any way. In all probability, they may well have disagreed with each other about issues such as addressing students' behavior using a reward system or discussing controversial issues with students. What these commentaries offer is a glimpse of what these dedicated early career teachers thought and did in relation to some social equity literacy principles.

5.1 Recognizing the Sociocultural-Sociopolitical Factors Shaping Communities

All of the teachers observed inequalities between the educational opportunities they received and those afforded to their students. All commented on the ways that poverty weighed against children, reflecting their structural orientations to teaching (Chubbuck 2010; Whipp 2013). All of the teachers noted many of the ways their students' families were challenged by poverty. Leslie discussed inequalities beyond the realm of education: "*I would come to learn, the achievement gap overlapped with other American institutions: healthcare, housing conditions, access to healthy food and exercise opportunities, transportation options, job availability, and the legal system, to name a few.*" All of the teachers discussed class-based privileges related to education. Leslie, Clare, Megan, and Tracie mentioned issues of race/ethnicity that affected their students' lives. Clare, for instance, focused on the undocumented status of many of her students' caregivers and how this contributed to the anxieties of caregivers and the disengagement and fears of her students. These teachers confronted their own race and class privilege and discussed how they considered students' race/ethnicity to inform their teaching practices. Clare stated:

> Acilina inspired me to delve into literature that mirrored her heritage. I found a character in the story La Mariposa (Jiménez 2000), a first grade boy whose family comes to America

and struggles through school, never knowing exactly what is going on because he does not know the language.

Leslie inquired about how she was able to adjust her teaching to the racial/ethnic differences of her students: "*Was my classroom atmosphere more rewarding of the quiet demeanor of a Latina girl than of a more vocal Black boy, for example?*"

Instead of seeing failure as related to students' abilities or the "pathology" of urban families, the teachers saw failure primarily as a consequence of structural disadvantages which undermined students' access to quality schools and literacy teaching. Megan framed it this way: "*Most students I have taught have a hunger for reading, and desire to learn the skills necessary to read books at their level. They may have just not been taught properly, and in a few cases, there were undetected learning issues.*"

All the teachers recognized some forms of cultural capital in the communities surrounding their schools, although none of the narratives contained descriptions of time spent learning about the varieties of social supports and networking that were present in these communities. Rather, notions about community wealth (Yosso 2005) were constructed informally, through conversations with caregivers and by observing students. Rachael discussed a number of positive supports from families, including the involvement of parents and grandparents in school, library, and church activities. Tracie, for instance, gleaned from a parent how much his daughter's literacy success mattered to him. While she did not describe this encounter in terms of the father's aspirational capital, this event conveyed to her a caregiver's hopes and dreams as a positive familial influence. Megan noted: "*The grit my students display each day clearly comes from a lifetime of watching their families overcoming obstacles and supporting one another.*" Leslie observed that her students: "*[E]ntered school having been steeped in the principles of hard work, dedication, pride, loyalty, and integrity.*" To Leslie, these principles were cultivated in students' homes and communities.

5.2 Enacting Culturally Responsive, Sustaining, and Critical Teaching

Ladson-Billings' (1995) conception of culturally responsive (CR) pedagogy focused on raising students' academic success, affirming their cultural identity, and developing their sociocultural consciousness. Of particular importance in CR teaching is seeing students as inherently capable and relating to them in ways that foster their academic success. All of the teachers profiled in this book either told students they were capable or expressed thoughts about students' strong capacities as they described particular students.

Another essential part of CR teaching is maintaining strong links to caregivers and community members. All of these teachers acknowledged the complex lives of caregivers and saw them as great sources of knowledge. Clare's understanding of the out-of-school lives of her students depended on her frequent interactions with

caregivers with the help of her assistant teacher. Megan indicated that students' caregivers were very supportive of her classroom routines and expectations. In chapter "Sound Advice From Teachers to Future and Practicing Teachers", Leslie recommends forming an alliance with caregivers "to form a tripod of teamwork among you, them, and the students."

All of the teachers indicated that they drew from students' knowledge traditions to inform their literacy practices, although none described doing deliberate ethnographic work to investigate families' "funds of knowledge" (González et al. 2005). Megan described her own intentional efforts to understand students beyond the classroom when she referred to using interviews and interest surveys to gather information about caregivers and students. Leslie discussed immersing herself in the literature of writers of varied ancestries to better understand the literary heritage that her students might connect with. Most often, information about students and their communities was gleaned much less formally, through the regular routines of teaching, including intra-school communication between themselves and administrators or through talking directly with children, caregivers, and other community members. Clare's discovery that two of her students were homeless precipitated her thinking about the need to address homelessness in the classroom. Rachael's communication with caregivers helped her formulate behavioral plans for students.

As indicated by Paris (2012), teachers need to be invested in the work of sustaining students' discourses and knowledge traditions to insure the preservation of a multilingual, multicultural curriculum. To various degrees, these teachers provided examples of culturally sustaining pedagogies in that they fostered and perpetuated students' experiences and heritage. Some, like Rachael, were not satisfied with a focus on a superficial "Heroes and Holidays" (Banks 1999) treatment of culture. She nudged her students to write about topics beyond birthday parties and family celebrations and modeled ways to write about everyday events, including relationships between family members. Clare brought many elements of culture into her classroom through literature that touched on culturally familiar themes. Leslie taught with culture in mind when designing a Poetic Identity Anthology in which students interviewed peers of similar and different cultural backgrounds as their own and wrote poems from the interviewees' perspectives. Tracie's Manifest Destiny project, with its emphasis on family narratives, addressed cross-generational values, beliefs, and students' heritage.

In addition, there were some examples of critical and transformative pedagogy in the narratives. The intent of critical pedagogy is to raise students' social consciousness and, ultimately, enhance their ability to challenge social injustices. Megan discussed using the works of rap artist Jay-Z and how he had been working to solve the water crisis in Africa. This captivated her students, and they too wanted to become involved in solving the problem.

Clare used literature to help her young students understand systems of oppression. Specifically, she described helping her students question stereotypes of homeless people, particularly their racialized notions of "good" and "bad" people. She also used illustrations to help students question the narrow ways in which the media portrayed characters.

The Manifest Destiny project was transformational because Tracie asked students to investigate the perspectives of indigenous peoples—a position not traditionally taken in history courses. Tracie helped students question the meaning of Manifest Destiny by having students gather stories of elders and family members who may have been subjugated by it. Additionally, Tracie briefly mentioned engaging in colour talk (Roberts 2010) with her students when she discussed with them the challenges they faced and how they could successfully deal with them.

Leslie challenged the traditional Euro-focused curriculum by inviting students to discover the notable contributions made by people in students' countries of origin. Her Poetic Identity Anthology also disrupted canonical representations of poetry as students wrote poems from cross-cultural perspectives. Additionally, this project illustrates third space teaching, as Leslie's students satisfied English/Language Arts standards by attending to various poetic devices, voice, perspective, and character when writing their poems. Through her interactive PowerPoint presentation "How Did I Get Here?" Leslie aimed to help students understand that it was not their abilities that prevented them from succeeding in school; rather, it was a range of social and educational inequalities that worked against them. Her action research project allowed students to identify and research problems in their own communities.

5.3 Valuing Literacies-Languages and Balancing Skills and Meaning

The teachers who taught emergent bilingual students (Rachael, Leslie, Clare, and Tracie) indicated in various ways that they valued language diversity. Rachael seized the opportunity to work at Honor, in part, because it was "*founded on respecting our students' home cultures and languages and using the arts in teaching*." Clare spoke about the value of her students' bilingualism: "*They [the students] didn't even realize how lucky they were, at the young age of seven, gaining fluency in two languages.*" Leslie invited her students to use their home language when writing their Poetic Identity Anthologies. One of Tracie's comments indicated that she acknowledged a range of literacy capacities across caregivers: "*I have found that no matter where a parent falls on the literacy spectrum, he or she almost universally understands the importance of reading.*"

Some teachers acknowledged that students possess literacies and languages that do not align with those valued at school. Tracie, for instance, wrote: "*I know firsthand that one of the biggest barriers to my students' learning is their inability to actively use a text, which coincides with their lack of school-valued literacy skills.*" Her inclusion of the phrase "school-valued" implied her recognition of "home-valued" or "community-valued" ways of being literate. Similarly, Leslie separated "critical thinking skills" from "academic skills" when she described the capacities of the twin girls whom she taught: "*Despite the unwavering devotion of*

their parents to strong educations for their daughters, and despite the incredible critical thinking skills and curiosity each girl possessed, each transfer brought the girls farther and farther behind in their academic skills."

While acknowledging these differences, some teachers wrestled with how to honor students' home-valued language while also helping them acquire the languages and literacies needed to succeed in school. Tracie recognized that having students use their own language in class would be most meaningful, but she wondered if this would result in lowering her expectations of students. She decided to begin with an open embrace of students' language and gradually expect them to use more academic language when talking and writing. Tracie wrote:

> How do I teach students who could not speak or write the academic or content language needed for them to "be successful"? I wrestled with monitoring my thoughts as to avoid lowering my expectations for my students. I struggled with - if they can explain it to me in their own words, is it actually meaningful for them to also be pushed to write and speak the same understandings utilizing the academic language. After much reflection and debate, I realized that I must start with my students explaining the concepts in their own words, but I could not end there.

There were no descriptions of teaching students about the functions of standardized versus nonstandardized forms of English or how specifically to develop students' knowledge of languages other than English (Charity-Hudley and Mallinson 2010). However, Leslie reflected on her own access to standardized forms, the privileges associated with this access, and the cultural misunderstandings between herself and her students that can surface in the context of their differences:

> This misunderstanding might, in turn, lead to teaching that invalidates students' cultures, assumes specific types of authority that do not mesh with my students' ideas of authority, or lacks instruction of the specific skills and "cultural capital" – what Delpit calls "codes of power" – to which I have access but my students do not.

All of the teachers taught standardized conventions of literacy and language by explicitly teaching literacy skills while also providing students with authentic engagements with literacy. Explicit literacy skill instruction included: Megan's use of word-study activities designed to find patterns in words and increase vocabulary; Rachael's work with students' social language skills; Clare's focus on vocabulary and word knowledge skills; Leslie's morpheme-combining vocabulary games. Clare also worked to build students' inferencing and critical thinking abilities. She stated, "*I wanted them to be thinkers, not re-callers.*" Leslie helped students decipher dense Shakespearean English by culling nouns, verbs, and adjectives from the play *Romeo and Juliet* and having students use this vocabulary to playfully shout insults at each other.

Examples of meaningful literacy engagements with whole, connected texts include Megan and Rachael's descriptions of independent reading events, Megan's use of leveled texts during "Book Club," Rachael's use of writer's workshop, and Clare's read-aloud sessions combined with her discussions of literature. Leslie and Tracie had their older students read, write, and talk about a variety of texts.

5.4 Advocating for Students

For the most part, teachers' advocacy efforts were focused on their own students and classrooms, a trend that matches other research on early career teachers' social equity practices (Athanases and de Oliveira 2008). For Megan, advocacy meant giving students the emotional support they needed while also establishing systems and routines so they could maximize their opportunities to develop in literacy. She worked hard to make sure all students were independently engaged in literacy activities within their centers while she provided developmentally targeted reading instruction to small groups of students. She created a guidebook to establish clear procedures to engender a sense of respect and responsibility in her classroom. She also conducted team meetings to help students sort out conflicts. Megan also restructured test-preparation exercises so that students would refer to previously read materials to answer different types of test questions rather than having them read new material each day. This allowed students to spend more time focusing on writing correct responses, and it was a better structure for providing individualized instruction.

Rachael's advocacy efforts including bringing all that she knew about her students and what she had learned about child development to build a classroom that would help her students feel safe, empowered, and loved—qualities that reflect authentic caring. She continued with her education at Columbia Teachers College to develop her students' literacy abilities, showing a commitment to her own professional development.

It is important to point out that Rachael taught in a school that was founded on principles of cultural plurality and these fit with her own ideas about preserving the cultural traditions of students. The close synchronicity between her beliefs and the principles upon which her school was founded did not appear to precipitate a need to challenge school practices or policies. For her, advocacy meant defending students' personhood and intelligence. She pressed students to reject inaccurate labels placed upon them, refused to accept the negative labeling of a new student, and worked with a team of colleagues together to help figure out how to best support this child.

Leslie focused on significantly raising her students' exposure to texts in order to develop their literacy skills. She imported books from local institutions and even her childhood home. Leslie was also transparent in letting students know why they needed to read more and therefore was able to get students to buy into her plan. She not only increased students' exposure to words but also taught them to hold books in the highest esteem. Any books dropped were to be picked up and kissed, a reflection of her Jewish heritage as any Siddur (Jewish text) that falls on the floor in a synagogue must be kissed when picked up. Leslie also described how she monitored her teaching with a student named Yesica until she determined that this student had difficulties with expression and could comprehend if provided with multiple-choice options.

Tracie's advocacy involved gathering information to improve her teaching practices. For instance, she consulted the work of Paul Bamrick-Santoyo in order to understand the significance of gathering data to inform instruction:

> One of the key turning points in my becoming an effective teacher was when I was able to master the technique of knowing what my students did and didn't know, having students being informed about their progress, and then being able to do something about it.

In order to advocate for her students, Clare felt she needed to reject the curriculum anthology that was provided to her and develop her own lessons based on the lives and heritage of her students, in accord with the principles of balanced literacy teaching. She also developed her own system of pairing students so they could read with each other, allowing her to step back and gather data about their reading abilities to inform her instruction: "*Their approximations gave me insight into what I needed to teach.*"

Through close observation of students and attention to their self-identities as learners, teachers were able to construct classroom environments that enabled learning. Leslie, Megan, and Tracie expressed concerns about students' negative images of themselves as literacy learners, and all tried to help students see their inherent capacities. Tracie centered her work on trying to challenge her students' entrenched ideas about their own inability to learn. This meant reducing the level of risk in her classroom and building a climate of trust. Rachael provided consistent routines to help her students feel secure and confident; she also insisted on having children hear their names spoken aloud each day so they would feel validated in school. Megan demonstrated care and comfort to a student whose mother had disappeared. She believed that learning in her classroom depended on her ability to address her students' affective needs.

To foster their students' literacy development, a few teachers actively resisted practices that were required of them. Megan and Tracie taught in public schools that were subject to policies of high-stakes testing and scripted teaching that were created externally at the level of their respective school districts. Megan felt the scripted literacy lessons held her students back from developing in literacy. She argued, "*This becomes incredibly infuriating when you know that your children are not learning at the rate they could be and are not improving where it matters.*" She revised part of the mandated lesson to provide instruction she believed her students needed to grow: "*I spent the time working on developing the important skills my students needed to learn, as opposed to having my students frantically write the same incorrect responses day-in and day-out because my principal required it.*" She shared the results she was getting with her own method with her principal: "*I turned in student work samples and showed proof that I was working rigorously with my students.*"

Tracie complied with requests to prepare her students for standardized tests. She pushed students hard, as evidenced by her nearly round-the-clock focus on writing during the time leading up to a major exam. She worked toward this goal relentlessly by having students use every available moment to write, by creating rubrics and graphic organizers to guide students, by providing explicit and individualized

instruction, and by even helping parents give constructive feedback to their children. In her narrative, she explained that her students needed to master writing to be active participants in the culture of power, but this goal went unrecognized in the school. In my subsequent conversations with her, Tracie indicated that she tried to devote more time for students to write, but that her supervisors wanted her to focus on reading instruction.

Despite the relentless experimenting, reflecting, reading, and collaborating these teachers undertook in an effort to provide students with opportunities to learn, there were times when they realized they had failed students, and this produced some of the deepest expressions of regret and soul-searching in the narratives. As Leslie said:

> I never figured out what, exactly, blocked her comprehension, and even though I gave her tenth-grade teachers all the tips I could for how Yesica could succeed, I couldn't help but think, at the end of the year, that I had failed her. If only I had recognized her struggles earlier. If only I had found a way to collaborate with her middle-school teachers to see what strategies they had tried. If only I had sought help from the Special Education staff at my school to determine other strategies I could use – or perhaps refer her to be evaluated. But I didn't do those things, and it broke my heart.

5.5 *Caring with Political Clarity*

Through teachers' recognition of some elements of students' sociocultural lives and their advocacy efforts based on this knowledge, we see the beginnings of caring with political clarity, or critical caring. The narratives include many demonstrations of caring *about and for* students. Teachers advocated for them and invested in their own and their students' learning (Noddings 2005). Critical caring requires developing a consciousness about students' sociocultural circumstances, and this means intentionally working to understand how race/ethnicity shapes students' lives, and how this awareness can inform instructional practices and ways of advocating for students (Roberts 2010; Rolon-Dow 2005; Valenzuela 1999). Critical caring compels teachers to disrupt the colorblind equal-opportunity myth that is entrenched in school discourses: "If you just work hard, you will succeed." Critical-caring teachers deconstruct this myth by engaging in straight talk with students about the challenges associated with being members of nondominant racial or language communities and what they can do to confront these challenges (Roberts 2010). The narratives show that teachers were journeying toward critical caring but that a more intentional focus on students' race/ethnicity and its impact on the sociopolitical conditions of their lives would be needed to care in this way. Movement toward this next phase would depend on the kinds of supports and guidance provided to teachers and their investments in their own professional growth.

Let's take Clare's case, for example. Clare spent four years in urban schools prior to receiving two education degrees and three certifications. Along the way she constructed many understandings about social equity, privilege, and culturally

responsive literacy teaching. She used these lenses to scrutinize her own privileges and consider her own social and racial positioning within this community. Clare's knowledge of the subjugation of families in the community around issues of language, citizenship, and race/ethnicity, and her advocacy for students based on this knowledge, demonstrated movement toward critical caring. Her knowledge of the sociopolitical circumstances of her teaching community influenced her classroom discussions about stereotypes of the homeless, white power, and racial discrimination—ambitious conversations to have with first graders, but we know they are possible (Cowhey 2006). One of her biggest regrets was that she was unable to use her emerging knowledge about immigration and the policing of Latinos in Arizona in her classroom: "*After all the readings and discussions about power and allies, I wish I could have turned it over to them to see what they could share with me. I could have let them be the authors.*"

As a first-year teacher and new to the community, Clare had not yet had opportunities to established deep and meaningful relationships with caregivers, or build understandings of the history of the community and the ancestral heritage of the children, or figure out the politics of immigration and the policing of Latinos in Phoenix, or identify networks of cultural and social capital within the community. As a White teacher from Philadelphia, Clare was a cultural outsider in this Phoenix school community; it would take more than just a year to build the kinds of social bonds and trusting relationships with community members that are necessary for critical caring.

It is also important to point out that critical care is entwined with forms of teacher capital, including teacher credentialing, identity, and knowledge, as well as the degree of flexibility teachers are provided to make decisions that benefit their students. Clare engaged in a sanctioned act of resistance when she received her principal's support to replace the literature anthology with a curriculum of her own creation. Yet it was not simply her principal's support that mattered in her ability to advocate for students. Clare came to the school with an advanced degree in reading, establishing a degree of credibility in the area of curriculum design. Clare believed this credibility prompted the principal to give her the authority to advocate for students.

While Clare advocated for her students by discarding the school's literature anthology and creating culturally familiar curricula for her students, it was unclear whether she would be ready to take on the role of activist beyond her classroom. Her advocacy efforts were focused on her own students within the confines of her own classroom. Activism at a school, district, or community level requires power and credibility—credentials that come with experience. In this regard, critical caring can be conceptualized by degrees, beginning with advocacy for individual children within classrooms (local) and extending to advocacy on a wider scale (public).

Clare's narrative indicated that she edged toward critical caring, but more time in the community and more professional guidance in this area would be needed to fully accomplish this transition. Critical teaching of this sort depends on acquiring a deep understanding of the sociopolitical challenges of those living in the

community and knowing how to talk about these circumstances in age-appropriate ways that help students understand their worlds so they may take action.

In these five narratives, social equity teaching and critical caring are linked with (1) teacher's beliefs, knowledge/credentialing, skill level, and identity (teacher capital); (2) how school leaders view teachers as decision-makers; (3) the level of synchronicity between teachers' beliefs and school policies/practices; (4) the types of support provided to teachers; and (5) the level of authority teachers are given to make decisions on behalf of their students. Contextualizing social equity practice in these ways prompts questions about what can be done in teacher education and school support to advance teacher development toward fuller enactments of social equity literacy teaching and critical caring.

6 Conclusion

Teaching for social equity requires sustained inquiry into the social, political, and racial/ethnic lives of students, their families, and their communities and integrating this knowledge with understandings about learning, teaching, curriculum design, and student advocacy. The narratives show the different ways teachers enacted many social equity stances, demonstrating their potential to become teachers who care with political clarity. Their development in this area will require investments by mentor teachers, teacher educators, and school leaders who are themselves committed to social equity. Next, we will discuss what school leaders can do to support early-career teachers' ability to develop in these ways.

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What School Leaders and Teacher Mentors Can Do To Support Teachers for Social Equity

Althier M. Lazar and Leslie M. Reich

Abstract The narratives revealed varied levels of support for teacher development across schools and different degrees of teacher autonomy for making instructional decisions. This chapter addresses what school leaders and teacher mentors can do to support teachers' instructional capacities and help them grow as educators for social justice. School leaders can support teacher growth by prompting teachers' self-reflection and working to foster teachers' professional growth. Teacher mentors can model instructional practices, provide in-class coaching, ask teachers questions that prompt self-reflection, and raise teachers' consciousness about social equity. Professional learning communities and teacher inquiry groups offer additional support for growth. Leslie Reich shares some insights from her own experiences working with school leaders in three different schools and how leaders can best support early career teachers.

Keywords Inquiry groups · Professional learning communities · School leaders · Teacher mentors

1 Introduction

We draw from the teacher narratives and the professional literature to discuss the kinds of support that new teachers need to thrive in underserved schools and continue to develop as social equity teachers. As previously discussed, high rates of teacher attrition in underserved communities contribute to the ongoing cycle of inexperienced teachers serving students in high-poverty communities (Ingersoll

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2003). In many schools, new teachers are often left to "sink or swim" and given very little support for curriculum and lesson planning (Ingersoll 2012). Unless early career teachers are supported and treated like the professionals they are, many will leave their schools to find teaching positions elsewhere—or they will leave the profession altogether, perpetuating the cycle of inexperienced teachers in underserved classrooms (Grissom 2011). This is an issue of educational equity and one that experienced teachers and educational leaders have a role in changing. In this chapter, we discuss what school leaders and teacher mentors can do to help new teachers sustain their commitment to urban teaching and grow as educators for social justice.

Two themes surfaced in the narratives that inform a discussion about teacher support in schools: (1) the varied levels of support for teacher development and inquiry and, (2) the different degrees of autonomy given to teachers to make instructional decisions. After highlighting these areas, we will look at the recommendations for supporting early career teachers in schools. At the end of the chapter, Leslie shares some insights from her own experiences working with school leaders in three different schools and how leaders can best support early career teachers. Let us briefly review how the different school environments influenced the teachers in this book.

The narratives indicate that the five teachers needed different levels of support when they first entered their classrooms. TFA corps members Leslie and Tracie needed to know about assessment and instruction and how to meet the diverse literacy needs of their students. Megan focused on needing to learn more about differentiating literacy instruction and, specifically, how to organize a guided reading block to optimize her students' literacy growth. Clare's professional needs focused on creating balanced and culturally responsive instruction. From these descriptions, teachers needed help in three distinct areas: (1) assessment and instruction in literacy, (2) matching instruction to students' diverse literacy needs, and (3) designing balanced and culturally responsive instruction. We also recognize a role for school leaders and teacher mentors to guide teachers toward caring with political clarity, even though we recognize this goal is not often prioritized in schools. Teachers' ability to scrutinize their own race- and class-based assumptions about meritocracy and achievement and understand the historical and political circumstances affecting their students' lives is vital for engaging in the kinds of authentic relationships with students that are needed to support their learning (Roberts 2010; Rolon-Dow 2005; Whipp 2014).

Before we discuss ways that school leaders and teacher mentors can support teachers, let us review the kinds of support that our teachers received in their schools. One source of learning support came from daily access to a mentor or colleague. Clare was assigned a Spanish-speaking co-teacher who mediated communication between her, her students, and their caregivers. Likewise, Rachael collaborated with a partner-teacher who was credentialed in English as a Second Language. Clare and Rachael discussed the benefits of having immediate access to these co-teachers of whom they could ask questions, weigh possible instructional

options, and gain insights and perspectives about specific children. This type of support was provided to only two of the five teachers.

The other teachers wrote about accessing various support options in and beyond their schools. Leslie indicated that she asked to prepare her students for tests but was not given much assistance with finding ways to raise their scores. Instead, she reached out to her TFA colleagues when she needed help serving the diverse literacy abilities of her students. Megan did not mention any in-class help but discussed attending professional development workshops provided through her school district. Tracie indicated that her school mentored first- and second-year teachers but did not go into detail about what she extracted from this type of support. In addition to these experiences, the teachers discussed independent efforts to learn about teaching through attending university workshops (Rachael) or by accessing various professional texts (Leslie, Megan, Tracie).

Rachael, Clare, and Leslie were given a great deal of flexibility to teach in ways they believed would enhance their students' literacy achievement. Megan and Tracie, however, were more restricted in their decisions about what and how to teach. Both felt their students' learning was compromised because they had to devote significant amounts of time to test preparation and administering tests. At the time these teachers wrote their narratives, adequate yearly progress guidelines under NCLB mandated total school restructuring for failing schools. Both teachers felt that if they did not produce high scores, they might lose their teaching jobs if their schools were reconstituted. This lingering threat was a continuing source of tension for these teachers.

As stated in the previous chapter, teaching conditions within schools can determine new teachers' ability to enact social justice goals; those who feel scrutinized or constantly under pressure to produce high test scores are less apt to take the risks they need to teach in ways that are consistent with culturally sustaining, social equity practices (Philpott and Dagenais 2012). Also, teachers may perceive that district-approved pre-published materials carry a certain value and moral authority (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), and so their willingness to augment these materials to teach in culturally sustaining or critical ways is reduced. On the other hand, those with strong equity orientations will find ways to resist practices that run counter to their beliefs about teaching. As we discovered with Megan and Tracie, however, resisting or changing mandated practices can be stressful and disheartening.

Standardized testing is not going to go away anytime soon. Even though many states are reevaluating the No Child Left Behind federal law that has driven the standardized testing movement over the last decade, Race to the Top also emphasizes the use of tests as a condition for receiving federal education funds and, increasingly, as a tool to evaluate teacher performance. At the same time, states are adopting the Common Core State Standards that come with their own standardized assessments. Most school leaders today, and particularly those in large, urban school districts, are pressured to comply with federal and state policies that require standardized testing.

Teachers' careers, and those of their school leaders, are made more tenuous when students fail to show academic progress on standardized tests. High-stakes tests result in narrowing the curriculum and prescribing what and how teachers should teach (Ravitch 2013; Wright 2002). Within many of these environments, teachers are either rewarded for complying with school-mandated policies and practices or punished when they resist or alter them. Discounting teachers' professional knowledge can be discouraging for new teachers who are starting to figure out what really works with their students. They are likely to feel frustrated when they are expected teach in ways that are so far afield from their emerging knowledge of how their students learn best. They may blame themselves and their own lack of experience, rather than flawed policies, for their failure to engage students while using mandated practices that do not match students' needs. Or they may want to do something about the disjuncture between school policy and their own beliefs but do not know where to turn. Clearly, new teachers need systems for dealing with the negative effects of high-stakes testing and prescriptive teaching.

Teachers need different levels of support in learning how to teach, and they need to be trusted to make instructional decisions based on their knowledge of students. School leaders and teacher mentors should provide flexible systems of support that consider each teacher's needs. Teachers also need support to develop as critical caring social equity educators. Next we discuss the different roles school leaders and teacher mentors can take to support teachers in these areas.

2 The Role of School Leaders

Despite the complexities of managing schools today and the diversity of background experiences that new teachers bring to schools, school leaders can do much to support them and their growth as social-justice educators (Borman and Dowling 2008; Brown and Wynn 2009; Grissom 2011). As Grissom states:

> The effectiveness of the school principal is found to be an especially important component of teacher working conditions; average teacher ratings of principal effectiveness are strong predictors of teacher job satisfaction and one-year turnover probability in the average school. Moreover, these correlations are even stronger in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students that traditionally have faced greater staffing challenges (p. 2576).

A study of 800 U.S. teachers who were asked to describe the characteristics of principals who enhanced their instruction revealed two themes of effective instructional leadership: communicating with teachers in ways that prompt self-reflection and promoting their professional growth (Blase and Blase 2000). The study found that teachers valued dialogue with principals that encouraged them to think critically about their practices. They identified effective school leaders as those who gave suggestions and feedback, modeled practices, used inquiry, solicited advice and opinions, and gave praise. In the area of promoting professional growth, principals used strategies such as emphasizing the study of teaching and

learning, supporting collaboration about learning, developing coaching relationships, and encouraging classroom inquiry.

Frequent and supportive communication with new teachers is also associated with their retention in urban schools (Brown and Wynn 2009). Principals who retain new teachers at higher rates than their peers tend to understand the issues affecting these professionals and are aware of how the teachers are impacted. They also tend to employ proactive (instead of reactive) approaches to support new teachers and apply high standards for their own and others' professional growth.

As indicated in the narratives, one of the major issues affecting two of the teachers was high-stakes testing and the imposition of rigid curricula that discounted their professional knowledge. Understanding that school leaders are also constrained by these policies, an important stance would be to unite with teachers to reduce the threat imposed by standardized tests. The focus should be on meeting curriculum goals. By becoming allies with teachers in defense of sound teaching, both school leaders and teachers will need to read the political landscape and become aware of the professional risks associated with resisting scripted programs (Achinstein and Ogawa 2006).

School leaders, however, cannot be the only professionals supporting early-career teachers. They must also rely on teacher mentors—those who have developed expertise in teaching and who are invested in teacher growth. Serving as teacher-coaches or professional-development leaders, these more experienced teachers can be an invaluable resource to new teachers.

3 The Role of Teacher Mentors

The learning curve for new teachers in urban schools is great. There is much to know about different teaching methods, differentiating instruction around the diverse needs of students, and teaching for social equity. Having regular access to an experienced mentor, or instructional coach, can be a lifeline to beginning teachers who are struggling to meet their day-to-day responsibilities. Much of the literature on teacher mentoring and coaching focuses on supporting teachers' ability to enact research-based practices in specific content areas and differentiating instruction (Allison and Reeves 2011; Carrera 2010; Coy 2004; Tricarico and Yendol-Hoppey 2012). Coaches can support teachers by modeling instructional practices, observing teachers and providing feedback, asking questions that elicit teacher reflection, and working with teachers to plan curriculum and select strategies with students' learning needs in mind. An important dimension of coaching is helping teachers explore the thinking behind their practices by asking them non-judgmental questions that prompt self-reflection, as in the cognitive coaching model (Costa and Garmston 2002). We recommend that readers look at this extensive literature to explore teacher mentoring to improve instructional practices. Our focus is on teacher mentoring to enhance teachers' understandings about social equity.

Equity-focused mentoring must involve helping new teachers learn about research-based practices and tailoring them to students' individual needs. In addition equity-oriented mentors can also help teachers confront deficit-based assumptions about students' capacities, and assist their inquiries about the cultural assets of students, the cultural wealth of communities, and the social and structural factors that impact students (Achinstein and Athanases 2005). Mentors work to raise teachers' consciousness about equitable access to learning by focusing attention on students' instructional experiences—inquiring about who is being left out and who is benefiting from instruction. This kind of support is needed to help teachers move beyond attending to their own performance to focusing on individual learners and their needs within particular sociocultural settings.

Effective mentor-coaches have themselves been highly successful teachers who are committed to social equity work (Achinstein and Athanases 2005). These professionals understand how adults learn and can nudge teachers toward social equity stances through respectful and patient dialogues rather than lectures. Further, mentors' ability to address both student and teacher learning simultaneously requires a complex knowledge base. In order to effectively support beginning teachers, mentors need access to theories, case studies, practice videos, and opportunities to reflect on their mentoring work with novice teachers. They also need adequate recognition and compensation for their mentoring roles, requiring investments by schools and districts (Stansbury and Zimmerman 2000). In addition to high-quality mentoring and access to school leaders, beginning teachers also need common planning time with colleagues and intensive professional development. This package of supports constitutes "comprehensive induction" for beginning teachers (Ingersoll and Strong 2011). The literature also recommends teacher access to professional learning communities, a topic we will explore next.

Professional learning communities (PLCs), sometimes referred to as inquiry groups, teacher learning groups, or teacher research groups, offers another source of support for new teachers. PLCs position teachers as theorizers and generators of knowledge, based on critical and systematic inquiries of their own teaching practices and their impact on student learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). In these mentoring networks, teachers inquire about their teaching, share and produce knowledge, engage in collaborative planning, and question school policies and practices in safe and supportive environments (Philpott and Dagenais 2012; Riley 2015; Ritchie 2012; Timmons 2007). These professional learning communities are well established in the research literature and connected with sustaining teachers' ability to do social-justice work in schools.

Riley (2015) discusses how a group of secondary teachers supported each other by sharing their visions of literacy and teaching, establishing a focus for inquiring about their own practices, discussing ways to enact critical literacy practices, and sharing the challenges they faced when the policies and practices in their schools did not align with their visions. The study group was a safe venue for strategizing how to negotiate with administrators about school policies so they could teach in ways that aligned with their visions of critical literacy practice. This work was done

among teachers of varied experience levels, but these arrangements can be an important resource for helping new teachers grow as critical educators.

Picower (2011a, b) focuses on how inquiry groups help new teachers develop social-justice orientations. She explored how a social-justice critical-inquiry group (CIP) supported the development of new first- and second-year teachers who graduated from a program centered on social justice education. These teachers were invited to participate in biweekly campus-based meetings that were primarily teacher-designed and -facilitated. The meetings were guided by certain norms, such as the expectations that all members participate, the appreciation for diverse points of view, the allowance for tension during group conversations, and the acceptance that some issues would remain unresolved. The teachers met in critical-friends trios to discuss the issues they faced in their classrooms and acknowledged each other's contributions. They also engaged in activities related to social justice with members of the whole group. These included:

> Responding to readings, developing curriculum on social justice topics (child labor, Iraq war, historical racism, genocide), sharing and troubleshooting enacted curriculum, examining student work to see how students were understanding themes of social justice, researching and learning about specific topics they identified as knowledge gaps in their own learning (Malcolm X, service learning), listening to guest speakers on social justice pedagogy, preparing for presentations on their work, creating blogs of their projects, and more.

Picower found that the group helped teachers in three ways. First, it provided models of social-justice teaching that inspired and motivated the less-experienced teachers: "The more experienced teachers gave a sense of what was coming next and their projects and their projects helped newer members understand how to get started, and sparked new ideas for everyone. Additionally, listening to each other's experiences helped them all to better analyze their own contexts" (p. 18). Second, the CIP project improved teachers' ability to teach for social justice. Often, teachers appropriated the norms they used in their group meetings, such as accepting the tension that often surfaces when speaking about social justice issues, and they applied these norms to their own classroom practices. And because participants shared curriculum ideas, they were able to implement social justice-oriented projects that may have been disregarded without such group support. Third, Picower found that teachers' participation as group facilitators helped them develop leadership and mentoring abilities.

One implication of this research is the need to rethink the usual professional development model of having "experts" come into schools a few times each year to dictate to teachers what they should be doing in their classrooms. Picower indicated that "true teacher development requires long-term and intense investments in the relationships and well-being of aspiring social justice educators" (p. 23). This is especially necessary for teachers whose social-justice orientations are challenged by the presence of high-stakes testing and mandated curricula. Such groups offer teachers support to build their social-justice visions and generate strategies for negotiating prescribed curricula and mitigating the negative effects of high-stakes testing (Picower 2011b).

Many teacher-led inquiry groups that support teacher learning are formed outside of schools. In Philadelphia, for instance, the Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative (TLC) and the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) are two urban-based teacher collaborative networks that support teacher growth in understanding students' literacy capacities and learning needs. Teachers in the Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative use oral inquiry processes, based on Carini's (2001) work at the Prospect School in Vermont, to study children's work in the context of their classroom and school lives. Common to these groups is the inquiry stance of teachers becoming students of their own students in ways that challenge existing assumptions about teaching and research on teaching (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009).

The availability of in-class mentoring and school-based professional learning communities is dependent on school leaders who are invested in teacher development and who actively discuss, support, and/or organize these opportunities. This often requires school leaders who have themselves developed critical, social equity orientations and who are deeply invested in creating transformative schools.

Throughout this book we have made explicit the connections between published research findings and the lives of teachers through the use of teacher narratives. Again, we turn to the narrative form to illustrate what some of these findings look like in the authentic contexts of urban schools. We share Leslie's perspectives of school leadership and teacher mentoring based on her work in three different schools. In particular, she focuses on her own professional growth in her most recent school, as a consequence of excellent coaching and her own participation in a teacher inquiry group.

4 Leslie's Reflections on the Significance of School Leaders and Teacher Mentors

As a veteran teacher of eight years, Leslie reflects on the different kinds of support she has received from both principals and coaches. Her greatest professional gains have come from her current principal and coach. Their leadership styles complement what has been presented in the research literature on effective school leaders for new teachers in underserved communities, especially those who aspire to create social justice educators.

4.1 Establishing Touch Points

School leaders have the burden and the privilege of setting a first-year teacher up for a lifetime of healthy mindsets around instruction, children, professionalism, hard work, and growth. Having taught in three different contexts in three different

geographic regions, I have experienced a variety of school leadership styles, some more effective and inspiring than others. School leaders play the crucial role of largely determining what type of year a first-time teacher will experience. Will it be a year of more tears or more smiles? Will it be stressful but also rewarding? Will it be based on fear or on confidence? Will it inspire a teacher to want to stay in the classroom? From my perspective as a teacher, the best school leaders I have worked with regularly engage in certain practices that inspire and support me and play instrumental roles in my development as an educator: they allow access to themselves and maintain an open-door policy, provide honest and supportive feedback, conduct tons of classroom observations, encourage mentoring and networking, and help new teachers develop systems.

I have found that the level of access a teacher has to his/her school leaders and the quality of that access determines how much trust that teacher will develop in that leadership—and thus in the school and him/herself at large—and informs that teacher's overall happiness and likelihood of wanting to remain at the school long-term. New teachers have a thousand questions, a thousand concerns, a thousand fears, and a thousand unforeseen challenges to confront. In my experience, the best way to build this trust is to increase the number of "touch points" between leadership and new staff that are honest, supportive, and mutually respectful.

The amount of access I have had to my school leadership impacts how hard I want to work and how long I envision myself working at the school. At one of the schools I taught in, I felt completely isolated from my school's leadership. My principal inaccurately pronounced my name (on the few occasions he even addressed me by name) and introduced me to a visitor as teaching a grade and subject I did not teach. He did not know me as a person or as an educator, which prevented me from perceiving him as an ally and as one of the primary individuals responsible for my development as a new teacher and new professional. My principal did not provide inspiration during the most trying months of the year (like in the middle of winter when the sun rises after we're already at school and it gets dark at 4:30 in the afternoon); he did not provide encouragement in the weeks prior to the state exam; he did not compliment me or my students on the insightful work we hung on the walls or upon achieving strong test results. In observing his work habits, he was often the first staff member to leave campus at the end of the day, and he was frequently seen working at his desk instead of in the halls or classrooms. In fact, my final evaluation at the end of my first year focused on my perfect attendance and good relationship with a particular colleague. Truthfully, even if he had offered praise for a year well done, I would not have considered his praise to be genuine or meaningful. He and I simply had not had enough "touch points" for me to trust that his words were well intentioned or evidence-based. Although I found my own sources of inspiration, working for a principal who motivated me to work hard and who assured me of my sense of belonging at his school would have invited me to envision a longer career at his school.

By comparison, the principal of the school where I now teach in New York City sends weekly emails to inspire us, especially in the most grueling times of the year. He schedules one-on-one check-ins with every staff member multiple times a year

to ensure that he has a pulse on the goings-on of the school. He delegates the responsibilities that accompany teaching a staff with a wide array of experience to ensure that all staff members get differentiated support. He is frequently one of the last people to leave the building; he can rarely be found at his desk during the school day since he is usually observing, holding meetings, or talking to kids who have been sent out of class. He answers emails within minutes, even on the weekends. He lives and breathes our school's happiness and success. His hard work inspires me to work hard, and he makes me want to work at my school forever.

4.2 Supportive and Socially Conscious Professional Development

Since school leaders are responsible to set an agenda for professional development, it is imperative that teachers feel empowered to proactively communicate with their leaders about what they need to grow as professionals. An open-door policy provides an avenue for teachers to dialogue with their leaders about challenges that have arisen and ideas that could be implemented. I have approached my current principal for advice on innumerable topics, ranging from challenges with particular students to communication with other staff members.

In the fall of 2013, I scheduled a meeting with my principal to discuss an idea about which I'd done some research during the preceding summer: our school did not openly discuss diversity and inclusiveness (D & I), and I believed that doing so needed to become a priority. I presented what I'd learned and made my case. My principal listened to everything I said, but still was unconvinced that D & I should move to the forefront of our school-wide professional-development agenda. I asked him for the benefit of the doubt and offered him excerpts from the reading I'd done over the summer. We scheduled a follow-up appointment. When we returned to the table, my principal relayed to me what he had learned from the readings and became convinced that we needed to prioritize D & I. He carved time into our school's all-staff professional development calendar to run my first session, and after receiving hugely positive feedback, we now incorporate D & I sessions into our regular professional development.

These sessions are typically 90–120 min. I do the bulk of the work with regard to design and execution, with the help of a few other people (vacillates between members of the school leadership team and other teachers). We had one session—"Becoming Active Allies"—that focused on how to respond to students when they say something that is derogatory or ignorant in some way; it involved dozens of scenarios (about race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and cognitive ability) that teachers practiced responding to in groups of three. The most recent three sessions have focused on race. We brainstormed our own stories in racial affinity groups and discussed how those realities manifest themselves in the workplace. Then we discussed some of the micro-aggressions teachers and students commit that send subtle messages about

certain racial groups, and then had a session on affirming student identity. From here, we are hoping to continue discussing race and begin to also include gender.

There is always pre-work ranging from locating articles by experts in the field, to random articles I find online, to videos that would be pertinent. During sessions, there is a huge emphasis on individual reflection, discussion in small groups, and whole-group share-outs. We solicit teacher feedback after each of the sessions. The overwhelming response from the staff is that the sessions have been enormously helpful in teaching them things they didn't know across lines of difference and allowing them the space to explore this incredibly important part of our work. Many staff members have indicated that the D & I sessions are their favorites of the year. I can recall dozens of times when a teacher sees me in the teachers' room or in the hall and relays a story of how they tackled a D & I-related challenge.

My principal's open-door policy allowed me to advocate for the creation of a program that I believed our school desperately needed, and because he and I trusted each other, we worked together to get on the same page and take next steps that we both believed were in the best interest of our students.

The example of an open-door policy can extend from school leaders to teachers and other staff members of a school. Without it, new teachers will face great obstacles in developing themselves as professionals and learning to handle conflict in a calm and respectful way. My first year as a teacher was also my first in the professional world after graduating college. Although I'd grown up in a large family and been involved in numerous activities throughout high school and college that required communicating and working with others, I had never worked in the professional sphere. The staff was largely divided into two camps: those who worked incredibly hard and held themselves accountable to high expectations and those who didn't. Naturally, I fell in with the former group. What I didn't realize, however, was that the two sides did not peacefully coexist; rather, they deeply resented each other. So when I assumed a role on one side, I was exacerbating a staff-wide divide that bred conflict during meetings, gossip after school, and a complete lack of collaboration across grades and content areas. Our principal either failed to notice this unhealthy adult culture or failed to prioritize its reconciliation. The end result was not only an unhealthy work environment for staff members but also an academic environment that did not achieve the results it could have. And the end result on a personal level was that I learned unprofessional ways to communicate with colleagues.

Fortunately, I have not experienced this challenge in my current school, and I have since prioritized professionalism in adult culture. I have learned both by example and by direct instruction how to resolve conflicts with colleagues, how to deescalate contentious discussions, and how to speak up proactively about a difficulty I face with one of my peers. At my current school, entire professional development sessions are devoted to advice on how to communicate with others about sensitive topics. Since engaging in these sessions, I have learned to confront these issues proactively, and my colleagues have done the same. The goal is that there is no gossip, there is no questioning of others' intent, and there is no built-up resentment. We are approaching that ideal.

4.3 Classroom Observations and Supportive Coaching

The idea that staff members should be able to give feedback to one another on a regular basis transfers from the teachers' lounge to the classroom. Great school leaders conduct numerous classroom observations—at least once every two weeks, preferably more—of new teachers. These observations serve multiple purposes: provide feedback for the teacher in terms of academic instruction and cultural feel of the classroom, build teacher skill by engaging in real-time coaching, and keep a pulse on what's "really going on" in classrooms. As a new teacher, I obsess over the particulars of my lesson plans and make sure that the classwork is just right, but how will I know whether my actual instructional delivery is "good"? How would I know whether I'd used every minute effectively and met the needs of every student in the class? I needed someone with a finely tuned instructional eye to watch my class and tell me how to improve.

Since school leaders most often do not teach a class of their own, they can become removed from what it feels like on the "ground level." Classroom observations can mitigate this problem. One afternoon in October when I was teaching in Oakland, my principal received a call from Laurent's mother: the teachers were picking on her son and giving him far too many detentions. My principal spoke to each of Laurent's teachers and observed him in each of his classes to find out what was happening. She found that Laurent's behaviors did, indeed, warrant multiple detentions over the course of a day. The problem, however, was that his teachers were not calling his mom to inform her about the specific behaviors that were eliciting the consequence. As a result, Laurent's mom had access to an incomplete story: Laurent was controlling the narrative. The classroom observations and individual conversations my principal conducted uncovered the truth of what was happening, and all parties were able to work towards a solution.

Naturally, one of the greatest ways to build trust between a school leader and a new teacher is to establish regular check-ins. These consistent appointments provide the space for establishing rapport and allow a new teacher to see that his/her leader is indeed an expert in the field, to understand that his/her leader has the best interest of teachers and students at heart, and to have faith that the leader truly believes that the teacher can lead students to success. At my current school, these meetings are a regular practice for instructional coaches and their mentees. My coach started the school year by issuing a survey that allowed her to learn about my working style, the ways in which I like to receive both critical and positive feedback, successes and failures I have experienced in working with school leadership in the past, and other more personal qualities I would want her to know, like my favorite candy and what I like to do in my free time. To my surprise, she actually took my survey answers seriously and coached me in the way that matched the style in which I like to be coached.

Once this trust started to become established, I went to my instructional coach for every need that arose. On one occasion, I had a difficult time envisioning how I would engage students more in the process of figuring out how to successfully

analyze evidence in a way that proved the overall thesis of the papers they were writing. I knew when students had done a successful job and when they had not, but every time I tried to explain the criteria for success, they wound up merely restating their evidence or taking their inferences too far. My instructional coach suggested that we spend one of our weekly meetings thinking through different ways to teach this skill. We considered a think-aloud so that students would have a model for how to conduct this type of thinking; we entertained the idea of having students give and receive feedback to one another; we brainstormed ways for scholars to examine several examples and non-examples.

We decided on an idea that would remove a significant amount of scaffolding from the lesson, thereby encouraging scholars to do their own thinking about what makes analysis successful. I placed two examples of body paragraphs in front of them. Each paragraph utilized the same assertion and presented the same evidence, but the analysis was different. Neither example was weak, but one was clearly stronger than the other. I asked them to evaluate both, identify the stronger version, and decide what made it stronger. Once they had articulated the answer, I gave them another paragraph, this one with an assertion and evidence, but without any analysis at all. They filled in their own analysis, thinking about what they had previously articulated. The results were strong. I then set them free to work on their own papers; they produced some of the strongest analysis I had seen from them all year. My instruction became more rigorous and clear when I had the benefit of co-planning with my coach.

I once posed a question to the class regarding George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "Why did Orwell choose to portray Trotsky and Stalin as pigs?" A few scholars provided answers that were feasible, but no one really arrived at what I felt was the correct one. I called on a few more kids, but still no one got it. I gave up and told them in frustration, "Pigs have reputations for being dirty and greedy but intelligent in the animal kingdom." After the lesson, my coach led me through a few alternate ways I could have elicited the information without simply giving it away: I could have presented a nonfiction reading about the reputations of various animals, or I could have invited the scholars to collaborate with partners and then cold-called on them to share with the class. For the next lesson in which I asked a question about the author's craft, I was better prepared to keep the rigorous thinking squarely on the shoulders of students, even if they didn't immediately get an answer right.

Occasionally, there are moments while I am at the front of the classroom and a challenge arises that I do not know how to handle. Perhaps I ask a question and zero hands go up. Perhaps a student turns to chat with a neighbor every time I turn around to write on the board. Or maybe a student publically responds to a consequence in a way that is subtly disrespectful. During these times, a new teacher might feel paralyzed: should I give a consequence? Should I wait to address the issue with the student in private? What if my tone is too harsh or too meek? Real-time coaching can help a new educator handle these situations in a way that is authentic. On one occasion during my first year teaching in New York, I asked the class whether George was justified in killing Lenny in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Two students dominated the discussion: Jamya argued that killing was

wrong in every circumstance, while John asserted that Lenny would have died anyway, so it was better for George to be the one to carry it out. The argument seemed great from my perspective: Jamya and John were deliberating over the exact point I wanted them to debate. What I didn't understand was that only two students in the room were actually doing the thinking. What were the other 28 doing? My coach stepped in: "Pause the discussion. Jamya and John have named the two sides of the argument. Everyone, turn and tell your partner who you agree with more and why." While the scholars were discussing, my coach showed me the benefit: now everyone was doing the thinking. When a similar situation arose, I utilized the skill my coach had just demonstrated for me.

The amount of access a new teacher has to his/her school leadership also determines the likelihood of implementing an innovative idea. In the spring of 2012, students in my class were three weeks into a seven-week independent research project. In looking over their work and providing feedback and suggestions for moving forward with their projects, I realized that my scholars fell into three different buckets: those who came across significant research challenges (their topics were too broad or too narrow; they had considerably more learning to do before being able to make sense of the research; they had discovered far more nuances in their ideas than they had anticipated), those who had conducted comprehensive research but who needed advice on how to make sense of all of it in an outline, and those who had already begun outlining and simply needed to keep going. How would I teach a whole-class lesson when my scholars needed such drastically different things from me?

An idea occurred to me that, because of my strong relationship with my instructional coach, I felt comfortable suggesting to her and asking for her feedback. I proposed that I teach the class in stations: teach the third of the class that had made the least progress first while the other two-thirds of the class were working independently, and then teach the other kids after that. The idea would require me to put them in groups and have the groups move around the room holding their laptops. My coach encouraged me to follow through with the differentiated plan and acted as a thought partner on the challenges that would arise. We thought through how we could make the plan run as smoothly as possible, and then she came to the lesson to observe it in action. It was enormously successful. Kids got exactly what they needed from me and thus had a hugely productive class period—all thanks to my coach's openness to innovative ideas.

My principal and coaches do much to ease the negative effects that standardized tests can often have on students. This is because we don't tend to focus on these tests but instead concentrate on achievement in the regular curriculum. About three weeks before the state test, we begin preparing the scholars for it and make them feel pumped and confident that they will do well. Our coaches write us notes telling us how prepared the kids are thanks to our hard work. Most importantly, we are all involved in analyzing data after it comes back. We look at it honestly and critically, analyzing where students need to improve and noticing places where particular kids did well or showed tremendous growth.

4.4 Establishing Systems

From a logistical perspective, great school leaders help new teachers develop systems that increase effectiveness and minimize stress. Teachers of every content at every age will report the enormous number of papers that pass through their hands in a given school year: homework and classwork assignments (both handed in and ready to be given back), exit tickets, hall passes, notes from administrators, notes between students, book check-out forms, notebook paper, lecture notes, text packets, index cards—and those are just the papers that directly involve students. Then there are notes from meetings, from professional development sessions, on curriculum notes from one-off conversations, reminders for later, to-do lists, etc. Schools go through seemingly infinite amounts of paper. New teachers need someone to help them anticipate the physical logistics of keeping track of it all. Since most school leaders have been teachers earlier in their careers, they can share some "tricks of the trade" for approaching this challenge in a way that diminishes anxiety and actually improves performance.

The same goes for computer and email. My Microsoft Word houses dozens of folders: curriculum, staff-wide development, my personal development, taxonomy, scholar work samples, resources, homework, vocabulary, grammar, and all the other files that are for my "outside life"—household and family documents, etc. Email organization is a craft unto itself—folders marked by urgency, sender, and topic are crucial. The principal of my current school believes that keeping track of deadlines and files makes for efficiency and minimizes the stress that naturally accompanies receiving dozens of emails a day. He hosts an optional workshop at the beginning of each year to impart the wisdom of his email organization system to his staff to use at their discretion. Because he feels passionately about organization, I am inspired to do the same, and his color-coded system has saved countless hours of searching through files looking for one particular email.

Organizational systems don't stop simply with electronic and hard-copy papers; I have found that the amount of time I dedicate to working outside of school depends directly on my efficiency and productivity during the school day. As part of their regular check-ins with recent hires, great school leaders will teach new educators how to avoid doing unnecessary work, how to use their prep periods purposefully, and how to set boundaries between work and outside life. Double work can be a regular part of teaching if educators do not develop ways to avoid it. At one time or another in my teaching career, I have (embarrassingly) done the following: I have graded an assignment on the students' papers, recorded the grades on a hard-copy tracker, and then transferred the written grades to my digital gradebook. I have written lesson plans, created classwork from those lesson plans, and printed out a copy of that classwork to fill out a teacher answer key by hand. I have opened a blank document and retyped the heading of my classwork assignments every day. I have called the parent of a student and had to call back with a second message I'd forgotten to include in the first phone call. I have taken notes in the hard copy of a book and then typed those notes into my computer, followed by

condensing them and sending them as an email to a colleague; I have written "thesis does not encompass all of your sub-arguments" by hand on sixty separate papers. In other words, I have done a tremendous amount of unnecessary work. A school leader at my school in Oakland, California, revealed some far superior systems for avoiding this unnecessary work, like condensing my lesson planning into one document and developing codes for giving students feedback on their work. These minute pieces of advice added up to hundreds of saved minutes of work.

I would have benefited greatly from learning from a school leader or veteran teacher how to use my "breaks" more effectively during the school day. As a first-year teacher, my morning classes ended at 10:35, and then I had a break until 11:20. I had one twenty-minute break in the afternoon, an hour-long break before my last class, and another thirty minutes between last period and the end of the school day. At first, I made a long list of all the action items I wanted to accomplish and prioritized them in order of importance and urgency—a system that had worked for me in college. What I often found, however, was that I used my first few prep periods trying to finish one big item having crossed nothing off my to-do list, skipped lunch, then made my copies after school. I would then go home and, even though I'd (mostly) finished one large item on my list, I still had 11 more that needed to get accomplished. By that time, I was exhausted from being on my feet all day without having eaten but forced myself to stay awake until ten, often working during dinner, to finish the items on my list. Then, after seven hours of sleep, I woke up and did the same thing all over again. I told myself I would get all my work done on Saturdays so that I could relax on Sundays, but I actually found that trying to do work after a full work-week was exhausting, and I didn't accomplish enough of what needed to get done, forcing me to complete the leftover work on Sunday. I was exhausted during the week and then had no weekend respite.

With regard to using my preparation periods, the biggest lesson I learned, after many months of stress, was that I had to actually plan what work to accomplish during these times. I figured out that I would grade papers in my early prep periods (so that I wouldn't have to lug papers home), do a little lesson planning in the middle of the day (when I still had enough energy), and then make copies after my last class (a task I could not accomplish at home and that required minimal mental energy). I figured out that attempting work on Saturdays actually made my weekends more stressful, so I started doing no work on Saturdays and saved it for Sunday mornings. I then started to begin each week having felt like I had enjoyed an actual weekend while still accomplishing my workload. School leaders should name these "best practices" for their new staff members, encouraging them to cater these systems to their own needs and working styles, and they should include checking in on new teachers' work-life balance and work effectiveness at their regular meetings.

School leaders play an enormous role in shaping the experiences of a first-year teacher. They know how hard new educators work and how quickly they must grow to meet the demands of their job. If these leaders commit to having enough discussions with their new staff members, observe them in action, and help them grow

as professionals and instructors, they will be able to find plenty of opportunities to give genuine and precise praise. Even as an eighth-year teacher, I am still hard on myself when a lesson doesn't go well, but when I don't see fast enough progress with the kids, it is school leaders who inspire me to keep teaching.

5 Why Leslie's Experience Matters

Leslie's narrative illustrates how school leaders and teacher mentors can shape new teachers' development. After her first two school experiences, she was fortunate to find a school where her principal invited frequent communication, listened to the issues she faced, provided feedback about her practices and ideas, and through his demonstrations of commitment to the school, inspired her to remain in her position. Her words are worth repeating: "*He lives and breathes our school's happiness and success. His hard work inspires me to work hard, and he makes me want to work at my school forever.*" He also provided professional development support to establish positive communication among staff and management systems for increasing efficiency in teaching and organization.

Most notably, this school leader took seriously Leslie's thoughts about diversity and inclusion and welcomed her ideas about launching professional development and group sharing sessions for teachers that aligned with social-justice principles. These sessions allowed teachers to bring new insights and ways of dialoguing about diversity into their classrooms.

We also see effective leadership happening on two other levels in Leslie's narrative: (1) a commitment from the leaders of her school network to utilize coaches as teacher mentors, and (2) strong instructional coaches who tailor their support to the individual needs of teachers. This professional relationship was based on mutual trust, established from the beginning with a very thoughtful survey issued by the coach. These initial trust-building efforts were key to Leslie's invitations to the coach to observe her teaching, and these visits resulted in rich collaborations that strengthened her literacy teaching and deepened students' learning.

Lastly, these school leaders are pragmatic about standardized testing; instead of obsessing over it, they have created a climate where achievement is the focus all year long. They work to raise students' and teachers' confidence levels and invite respectful communication on what the test results indicate and how teachers can respond to raise student achievement.

Leslie's experience exemplifies the central point of this chapter: school-level supports can have a profound effect on new teachers' views about themselves and their future employment plans. Had she received same level of support in her first school as she does in her present school, she may have remained in that school. Her narrative also shows explicitly what school leaders can do to create school environments in which teachers feel supported, respected, and where they can grow as educators for social justice.

6 Conclusion

Taking from the narratives, we noted the varied levels of support that our teachers needed when they first began to teach and the different types of support they received in their schools. Some teachers described communicating openly with their principals (Clare) and getting help through co-teachers (Clare and Rachael) and peer mentors (Tracie). These practices match recommendations for early-career teachers. New teachers need school leaders whom they can trust to help them build instruction that is rigorous, culturally sustaining, and critical. Structures that include frequent, respectful communication where school leaders listen and respond to issues that concern teachers most and establish systems of faculty mentoring and collaboration are key components of effective leadership. These components provide the best hope that schools will be able to retain and further develop talented teachers who are committed to social equity.

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Teacher Education Programs That Prepare Teachers for Social Equity

Althier M. Lazar

Abstract This chapter addresses what teacher educators can do to create teachers who understand the sociocultural and sociopolitical realities that impact students in underserved communities and are prepared to teach with an equity orientation. Teacher education programs are challenged to transform candidates' deficit orientations towards students and families and help candidates see their responsibility to offset educational and societal injustices through their roles as teachers. Since teacher education programs may not address these challenges in comprehensive and uniform ways, teacher educators need to commit to their own professional growth around issues of social equity and build programs that allow teacher candidates to (1) examine issues of privilege, subordination, and the sociopolitical factors shaping school achievement; (2) uncover the knowledge traditions of students, families, and communities; (3) explore models of advocacy and activism; and (4) teach literacy in culturally sustaining, critical, and balanced ways.

Keywords Teacher educators · Teacher education programs · Transforming teacher candidates

1 Introduction

In this chapter we look at what teacher educators can do to create teachers who understand the injustices of access and opportunity that many children in underserved communities face and are prepared to teach with an equity orientation. Pursuing this goal will require major shifts in teacher education, including addressing the uneven preparation of teachers in the areas of social equity and literacy instruction and preparing them for the realities of schools today. I will begin by discussing some of the challenges that teacher educators face in preparing all

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teacher candidates for social equity teaching and then recommend some specific ways to structure curricula around this goal.

The teachers in this book were oriented toward social equity work through various life experiences and then were exposed to various social equity principles in their undergraduate and graduate programs. Their experience profiles and orientations set them apart from many teacher candidates. Like most of teachers profiled in this book, teacher candidates today are primarily White, English-speaking, monolingual women raised in middle-class communities (Darling-Hammond 2010). Many who intend to be teachers do not have their sights set on teaching in underserved and/or urban schools that serve high concentrations of students of color and emergent bilinguals. Yet TEPs need to educate teachers for "everybody's children" (Delpit 1995) and are therefore challenged to (1) attract a more culturally diverse pool of teacher candidates, and (2) develop in all of them the identities and capacities to teach successfully in underserved communities.

Teacher candidates today are more aware of cultural diversity and more accepting of multiculturalism than their counterparts were three decades ago, but many have not acquired the complex understandings that would prepare them to serve students in culturally nondominant communities, primarily because they are unaware of the structural and institutionalized inequalities of schools and society that shape students' access to achievement (Castro 2010). Lacking these understandings, future teachers are more likely to "blame oppressed peoples for their failure' in the system of schooling rather than to recognize the system of failure embedded in institutional practices that disfavors and disenfranchises minority groups" (Castro 2010, p. 207). TEPs are challenged to transform candidates' deficit orientations towards students and families and help candidates see their responsibility to offset educational and societal injustices through their roles as teachers. Without an intentional focus on developing teacher candidates' understandings in these areas, many will be at risk of contributing to oppressive schooling practices and policies (Palmer and Menard-Warwick 2012).

2 Teacher Programs Today

The TEPs these teachers attended were oriented toward social justice goals, but this does not mean that their TEP programs were framed around the same principles or that particular principles were explicitly addressed in their programs. Although many TEPs claim to prepare teachers for social justice, there is little consensus about what "social justice" means in teacher education or how TEPs should be structured around this concept (Zeichner 2010). According to Whipp (2013), social justice has been equated with terms such as "multicultural education," "equity," and "achievement gaps"—terms that are conceptually very different. According to Hollins and Guzman (2005), "Universities are at different points in their preparedness for addressing issues of cultural and linguistic diversity. Some university

programs seem to be in the process of becoming more inclusive and multicultural in their approaches to teacher education" (p. 512).

This means that TEPs are continuing to produce teachers with varied levels of exposure to sociopolitical issues related to poverty and racism and different conceptions of culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches. There is no guarantee that current teacher candidates will have direct contact with students, families, educators, or other community members in underserved communities while they attend these programs. Teacher candidates may or may not be required to reflect deeply about their social and political positions relative to students in underserved communities. This is unfortunate given that so many underserved communities need equity-oriented teachers.

It is unclear whether or how TEPs are addressing these elements in their programs. What we do know is that some features of teacher preparation are associated with higher-than-usual levels of teacher retention in underserved schools. One longitudinal study of secondary teachers who graduated from a teacher program that focused on preparing teachers for high-poverty, urban communities found that almost three-quarters were still teaching and 88 % remained in urban education at the five-year point (Freedman and Appleman 2009). This is much higher than the national teacher retention rate of 50 % for urban schools (Ingersoll 2003). Based on interviews with this cohort, researchers identified six key reasons why graduates of this program stayed in teaching:

1. a sense of mission, which was reinforced by the teacher education program;
2. a disposition for hard work and persistence, which was reinforced and developed by the teacher education program;
3. substantive preparation that included both the practical and academic and harmony between the two;
4. the adoption of the reflective stance of a teacher-researcher;
5. the opportunity, given the high demand for teachers in high-poverty schools, to be able to change schools or districts yet still remain in their chosen profession; and
6. the ongoing support of members of the cohort as well as other professional networks across the early years of teaching (Freedman and Appleman 2009, p. 329).

Items 1 through 4 above reflect the strong influence of the teacher education program, particularly in the area of developing a strong mission to do social equity work. This research, along with the narratives that showed how TEPs inspired teachers to teach in urban schools, demonstrates the impact of these programs.

Another issue that surfaced in the narratives is the different levels of literacy-teaching expertise expressed by the teachers. Clare, Rachael, and Megan, who obtained teaching licenses before they began to teach, expressed greater confidence overall about their literacy-teaching abilities than did the alternatively certified teachers, Leslie and Tracie. Clare stayed for an additional "fifth" year to learn how to assess and instruct students with varied literacy profiles. This extra year may have made a difference in Clare's ability to set aside the scripted

anthology and create a balanced literacy curriculum around the literacy abilities of her students. Leslie and Tracie came to their classrooms with social justice leanings but expressed many concerns about their lack of pedagogical knowledge. Through much study, experimentation, and collaboration with colleagues, both teachers eventually gained confidence in teaching. Their stories, however, illustrate the concerns of alternatively certified teachers in their early months of teaching, and they raise questions about lost instructional time for their students.

These stories affirm the need to produce equity-oriented teachers who have enough knowledge and skill in literacy assessment and instruction to respond to the diversity of student's literacy needs from the beginning of the academic year. They also need to bring to these positions an inquiry stance that guides their ability to study and theorize about the ways their teaching works for particular students (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). These, in addition to understandings about social equity and organizing positive learning environments, should be among the minimal expectations for graduates of teacher education programs. Having teachers begin the profession without these understandings raises serious ethical questions about teacher licensure and the willingness of school districts to hire uncredentialed teachers.

One response to the uneven levels of pedagogical knowledge among TEP graduates is the use of instruments like the Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) to measure candidates' readiness for teaching. This is an attempt to apply a common set of expectations for teacher licensure by assessing teacher candidates' ability to plan instruction, teach, and assess student work. Teacher candidates are asked to provide evidence for these competencies in the form of lesson plans, instructional materials, student assignments, and video clips of themselves teaching in K-12 situations. Candidates submit these materials through an online platform to Pearson Publishing for external review by educators. The assumption is that such monitoring will assure that all students are getting qualified teachers, but many questions have surfaced about this assessment, including the high cost of the review, the qualifications of external reviewers, and the appropriateness of this assessment in evaluating teaching effectiveness in culturally and linguistically nondominant communities (Gary 2015). Until these questions are addressed, instruments like this will not solve the problem of determining who is ready to teach.

Another issue that surfaced in the narratives is the compartmentalization of teacher education curricula and the divide between social equity and literacy studies. In her narrative, Clare referred to Howard's (1999) research on White teacher privilege which prompted her to think about her own racial privilege in relation to the primarily Latino students she taught. Megan discussed Kozol's (2005) book on educational inequality, a topic addressed in her undergraduate *Schools in Society* course. This book prompted her to question the vast differences in public education offered to students in high-poverty Camden, New Jersey, and those who live in nearby affluent Cherry Hill. These were pivotal moments in these teachers' backgrounds, but neither teacher related these ideas to unequal literacy education opportunities or literacy instruction.

In most teacher education programs that I know best, literacy education curricula focuses almost exclusively on methods of literacy assessment and instruction; social equity concepts are not well integrated into discussions about literacy pedagogy. This leaves many teachers without a direction when it comes to fusing social equity principles into literacy teaching. The narratives show how teachers integrated social equity principles into their literacy teaching practices, but might they have been more deliberate about teaching this way if their literacy education programs uniformly addressed issues of social equity? Such a curriculum would foster teachers' ability to consider students' knowledge traditions and discourses to create culturally sustaining literacy lessons, facilitate book discussions on issues of racial or gender inequalities (Lazar and Offenberg 2011), and explicitly engage students in exploring standardized and nonstandardized languages in the context of reading, writing, or speaking experiences (Charity-Hudley and Mallinson 2010).

Building strong programs that clearly communicate their social equity missions, helping teacher candidates acquire the pedagogical knowledge and skills needed to begin teaching, and fusing social equity and literacy studies are three goals for teacher education. In order to reconceptualize teacher education curricula around these goals, teacher educators like me need to look first at our own mindsets and commitments as educators for social equity.

3 Teacher Educators' Development

Ladson-Billings (2001) wrote about the glacial pace of change in teacher education as many teacher educators have not studied issues of cultural diversity, social inequality, and social justice or reflected deeply about their own beliefs and assumptions about children and families in high-poverty, culturally nondominant communities. In the last 15 years, I have not seen dramatic changes in this area. How can we transform programs when teacher educators have not yet developed the understandings needed to do this work? Transforming programs requires that faculty work towards building a common language around issues of social justice in teacher education. According to Whipp (2014):

> In order to be effective, a teacher education program organized around a conceptual framework of critical caring would need to make sure that all full time faculty, adjunct faculty, school-based mentor teachers, and university supervisors who work in the program share the same vision for critical caring and the signature practices that support it. Such programs need to provide frequent opportunities for various teacher educators to collaborate on a vision for critical caring through common readings and discussions and also agree on signature caring practices that they want to see and assess in their exiting graduates (p. 15).

I am fortunate to be among a community of teacher educators who are interested in their own professional growth and have made some attempts to acquire a shared vision of social equity teaching. A few years ago we read Diane Ravitch's book,

Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools (2013) and met to discuss it. In *Reign of Error*, Ravitch exposes the current movement to replace public schools with either charter schools that are publicly funded but independently managed or private schools. She provides evidence that those behind the movement, including well-financed conservative foundations, are deliberately trying to dismantle public education. The book had particular relevance for us because Philadelphia is cited as having one of the highest rates of charter school turnovers in the country. That conversation stimulated a lot of discussion about the motives behind the privatization movement, how it is manifested locally, and how we can respond to the movement as teacher educators.

The year before, we read the scholarly works of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and invited her to campus for a day of dialoguing with faculty and students. This effort precipitated many conversations about what constitutes "social justice" in teacher education and how it is demonstrated in our curriculum. As a follow-up, we examined our courses to see how issues of social justice are addressed and how they could be more explicitly addressed and assessed throughout the curriculum. We created new rubrics for student teachers that listed dispositions specifically tied to social justice principles. These included "sets high expectations for students," "is aware of structural inequalities of schools and society that shape students' access to achievement," and "interacts respectfully with students of different backgrounds." This effort also translated to a new a conceptual framework based on the theme "Minds and Hearts for the Common Good," which explicitly outlines the kinds of dispositions we expect teachers to develop in the program based on social justice principles. From that conversation came new systems for describing and assessing dispositions related to social justice principles that are now embedded in many of our courses, including student teaching.

This year several department members will be spending more time in urban schools, learning from teachers about students, instruction, and how they negotiate the curriculum around issues of scripted teaching and standardized testing. The point is that we have tried to prioritize our own development as teacher educators for social equity. Each time we do this, we move our curriculum and our students forward. Without establishing a common language around issues of social justice teaching, it will be difficult to build a program that can intentionally prepare teachers for underserved communities. Yet it is important to recognize that there is no one point in time when a common language can be definitively established and after which a curriculum can be designed. TEPs are dynamic programs, based on teacher educators' continual investments in their own knowledge and willingness to collaborate with others toward achieving the goal of improving teacher education for social justice.

4 Recommendations for Restructuring Teacher Education Curricula

In this section, I recommend specific ways that TEPs might be restructured to ensure that candidates have opportunities to (1) examine issues of privilege, subordination, and the sociopolitical factors shaping school achievement; (2) uncover the knowledge traditions of students, families, and communities; (3) explore models of advocacy and activism; and (4) teach literacy in culturally sustaining, critical, and balanced ways.

4.1 Learning About Privilege, Subordination, and the Sociopolitical Factors Shaping Opportunity

According to Whipp (2013) educating teachers for critical caring requires that TEPs explicitly address (1) the creation of classrooms that combine emotional warmth and high academic and behavioral expectations; (2) cultivating and using students' knowledge traditions and cultural capital to inform instruction; (3) connecting with students' parents and communities; (4) building students' cultural competence, identity, confidence; and (5) being activists and advocates on behalf of students. Addressing these ideas in the TEP requires fundamental work in helping teacher candidates scrutinize their beliefs about themselves and others. Curriculum building must begin here because the practices described above depend on teachers who recognize their own social, racial/ethnic, and political positioning in relation to their students' and the sociocultural and sociopolitical conditions that impact their students' lives.

Many teacher candidates who first enter our program believe that merit—one's skills and efforts—are primary factors in school achievement. When they assess their own achievement history, they focus on the skills and efforts that have enabled them to succeed in school and tend to look at everyone else's achievements through the same meritocratic lens (Castro 2010). They also tend to see schools as fairly homogenous in delivering educational supports to children, even though they realize that some schools have more resources than others. Therefore, when some students fail, they conclude that it must be due to students' and/or their families' lack of skills and efforts. While few would argue that skills and efforts are essential to school success, they are shaped within complex systems of privilege and disadvantage that are often linked to racial or class memberships. Unless teacher candidates develop broader, more critical understandings about achievement, they will continue to blame students for school failure and will not be able to fully accept their own responsibility in offsetting educational inequalities (Castro 2010).

Clearly, teacher candidates need to recognize how academic failure is embedded in complex systems that disenfranchise many students in nondominant cultural communities. Therefore, TEPs need to include deep study about issues of social and

educational inequity related to poverty, racism, and other factors of subordination involving gender, citizenship status, and language ability. Recall Rachael's deep study of poverty which preceded her interest in pursuing a career in education. Teacher educators must specifically address issues of poverty without stereotyping children and families and creating self-fulfilling prophecies (Cuthrell et al. 2007; Hughes 2010).

Candidates must also examine themselves and others through the lenses of systematic advantage, particularly issues pertaining to economic and racial privilege, in order to cultivate the structural orientation that is needed to care with political clarity. These are often personal, autobiographical explorations of privilege and subordination including one's access to education and school-valued literacies and languages. As Chubbuck (2010) explains:

> White, middle-class teachers need to critically examine how societal structures have shaped their and their students' experiences (Darling-Hammond 2004) in numerous arenas—educational, political, economic, social. Those structures frequently award privileges and limit access on the basis of membership in racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups. When preservice teachers begin to recognize how power and privilege are dispensed differently to different groups of people, when they start to realize that they too are part of that inequitable distribution, many are in a better position to consider enacting a more socially just teaching practice as defined in this essay (p. 204).

Chubbuck describes several autobiographical assignments that she uses to help teacher candidates examine their own and others' personal racial, cultural, or socioeconomic experience from the perspectives of structurally imposed privilege and discrimination and how they have affected both their own and their future students' lives. She offers several exercises to prompt critical self-reflection, such as this one:

> I ask my preservice teachers to reflect on the level of individual hard work they exerted to be able to come to the university, an exercise most of them thoroughly enjoy and readily own. I then ask them to name the support they had in coming to the university, including financial resources, social networking, precollege educational opportunities, and cultural capital to negotiate the maze of ACT and SAT test preparation, application steps, and Free Application for Federal Student Aid forms. Finally, I ask them to reflect on how equitably those supportive resources are distributed in society (p. 204).

According to Chubbuck, exercises like these help teacher candidates question the idea that achievement is based solely on one's skills and work habits. She returns to this dialectic between individual and structural factors as she juxtaposes the "stories of the individual students they meet with statistics of how different racial, gender, socioeconomic, and language groups experience various educational policies" (p. 204).

Similar work involving autobiography has been used to investigate complex issues of race, culture, and social equity with teachers in graduate courses. Teachers participating in book club discussions around ethnic literature draw from their own life experiences to build more complex understandings of their own and others' cultures (Florio-Ruane and deTar 2001). Teachers also used autobiographies to define multicultural education for social justice (Fulmer 2012). As a course

instructor, Fulmer led a group of five teachers to draw from their own cultural backgrounds and inquiries about their students through "close listening" (Schultz 2003) to address issues of race, class, power, and create transformative teaching practices in their classrooms. Like many of the other projects discussed in this chapter, these experiences allowed teachers to develop the inquiry stances needed to become more systematic and critical inquirers of their own practices (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009).

In two of our foundations courses at SJU, Schools in Society (SS) and Literacy, Language and Culture (LLC), we use readings, reflective papers, course discussions, films, and simulations to help teacher candidates draw from their own lives and their work in urban schools with large populations of emergent bilinguals to construct understandings about schooling, language, and literacy through the lenses of structural and institutional privilege and subordination.

In the LLC course, I use a simulation and inquiry exercise that is designed to raise candidates' consciousness about issues of privilege and subordination and the linkages between these constructs and various class, race, and language-ability memberships. It involves handing out cards containing statements that reflect either a privileged or subordinated status. For example, the cards include such statements as "My parents can afford SAT preparation courses (privilege)," and "The school I attend does not offer honors courses (subordination)." Candidates read the cards aloud. Those who carry cards containing a privilege get to move physically closer to a space in the classroom designated as "achievement"; those with a higher number of "subordination" cards move farther away from this target. Once candidates read the cards and move to their designated spots around the room, I invite them to discuss how race, class, and language ability might relate to their positioning around the room. I then ask them to investigate these linkages and find empirical research to either support or refute them. For instance, if a candidate asserts that private SAT lessons are probably too costly for many of the emergent bilingual students they meet in their urban school placements, I invite the candidate to find out the following: (1) What are the demographics of the community in terms of income levels, race, ethnicity, and languages spoken? (2) What proportion of a family's income would be taken up by private SAT preparation lessons? (3) Does the high school within this community provide SAT preparation? Often they find that high quality, individualized SAT lessons are not provided to many students in underserved communities and that their own access to these, by virtue of their parents' income or the provisions made by their own high schools, put them at an advantage when they applied for college.

Similar to Chubbuck's activities that prompt students to think about relationships between individuals and systems, these examinations lead to deeper investigations of the structures that systematically advantage some and disadvantage others. For example, differential access to SAT preparation courses in public schools that can affect one's access to college is directly linked to different levels of funding that public schools receive as a consequence of property taxes.

In other investigations, candidates are asked to examine their own access to the languages and literacies that are valued in school and compare it to the access

afforded to students in underserved schools. For example, candidates are asked either to agree or disagree with the following types of statements and discuss their reactions afterwards:

1. I never had to worry about the teacher correcting the way I read aloud because of any regional dialect or accent.
2. I mostly had teachers who had high expectations for me.
3. Growing up, I never had to worry about teachers doubting my intellectual ability because of the color of my skin or the way I spoke.
4. The standardized tests I took in school were most likely normed on people of my race and language style.

Most of our candidates find themselves agreeing with these statements when they think back to their own experiences in school. But when asked to consider the experiences of the emergent bilingual students with whom they work in Philadelphia schools, they have trouble agreeing with these statements. We then interrogate the notion that schools support all students equally. Candidates begin to make connections between class, language, and racial status and degrees of systematic advantage and disadvantage in schools.

Films such as *Precious Knowledge* (2011) provide additional insight into how structural and institutional factors impact the day-to-day lives of four high school seniors as they resist the banning of their Tucson high-school ethnic-studies program by the Arizona legislature. The film reveals how an ethnic-studies curriculum, grounded on principles of culturally sustaining teaching and critical pedagogy, improved the retention and graduation rates of students, many of whom are Spanish-speakers living in high-poverty communities. Despite its positive influence on students, the ethnic studies program was banned from schools based on charges that it promoted segregationist and anti-American ideas. This film had a major impact on candidates. One stated, "This video made me see that it is mainly the institutions that are discriminating against these students and not giving them a fair opportunity that makes them turn against the education system."

The LLC course includes simulations that focus specifically on language privilege and subordination. For example, "The Queen's English" simulation examines language privilege and subordination. It involves telling candidates that new certification requirements for teachers will include tests of diction and that they will need to eliminate traces of regional dialects from their oral language. Most candidates react with shock, anger, and frustration because they do not feel that their regional dialects should interfere with their teaching careers. This simulation places teachers in a subordinated position, and many say it is the first time they have felt denigrated in school. In their written reflections following the exercise, most candidates empathize with students who have been systematically discriminated against when they use non-standardized speech in school. Another simulation involves giving candidates tests that are written partially in Spanish, prompting discussions about the difficulties of an "English-only" emphasis that is promoted in most schools in the United States (Garcia and Kleifgen 2010).

Candidates are also invited to consider how school factors such as "English-only" curricula, scripted teaching, and standardized testing shape students' achievement. In one study examining the impact of the course, candidates were able to identify a range of school factors that were inconsistent with research-based recommendations for emergent bilinguals (Lazar and Sharma in press). Further, we found that students remained critical of schools more than four months after they completed the course, with many indicating that limited resources combined with an "English-only" emphasis tended to undermine student achievement.

These investigations about privilege, subordination, and the sociopolitical factors that impact students' school achievement are advanced in and out of the college classroom, in contexts where candidates can reflect on their own and others' social and economic positioning and where they can inquire critically about these issues.

4.2 Learning About the Knowledge Traditions of Students, Families, and Communities

How can TEPs be structured such that graduates see the inherent value of students' knowledge traditions? How can they help orient teacher candidates around learning from caregivers and community members? Valenzuela (1999) calls for teachers to become students of the communities where they teach. This means that teacher candidates need take on the role of learners and community residents and families need to be reconsidered as experts (Rolon-Dow 2005). This is what Tracie did when she spoke with caregivers and learned of their hopes and dreams for their children to succeed in literacy. This is what Clare did when she sat with caregivers and learned about the stressors related to their undocumented status in the U.S. and their efforts to help their children with homework. This is what Leslie did when she invited members of her students' community to come to her classroom share their expertise. These teachers positioned themselves as learners of students, families, and communities, and this component needs to have a prominent place in TEPs.

The idea of learning about and from the community requires a radical shift in the ways educators view knowledge. According to Zeichner (2009) universities are seen as the "authoritative source of knowledge about teaching" (p. 95) but schools and communities need to be considered equal partners with universities in order to advance teacher candidate knowledge. He proposes that teacher candidates spend time learning not only from their university professors but also equally from teachers, caregivers, and community members in a third space that brings practical and academic knowledge together. According to Zeichner:

> This work in creating hybrid spaces in teacher education where academic and practitioner knowledge and knowledge that exists in communities come together in new less hierarchical ways in the service of teacher learning represents a paradigm shift in the epistemology of teacher education programs. I argue that this shift toward more democratic and

> inclusive ways of working with schools and communities is necessary for colleges and universities to fulfill their mission in the education of teachers (p. 89).

Among Zeichner's proposals for validating practical knowledge generated by teachers, caregivers, and community members, he recommends that teacher educators spend more time in schools and communities, and that knowledge of communities is more represented in the TEP curriculum. In educating teachers, I have found this last point to be especially salient. In the previous section, I indicated that having candidates uncover some of the factors that advantage some at the expense of others complicated their notions about school achievement as a meritocracy, but TEPs need to cautious that these investigations do not lead candidates to conclude that underserved communities are places of deprivation. TEPs need to help candidates problematize the "culture of poverty" concept through learning about and from families and communities.

One way for candidates to take on this role is through courses and/or experiences that invite candidates to explore the varieties of cultural capital within families and communities. Tara Yosso's "Community Wealth Model" (2005) provides a useful framework for exploring six types of cultural capital. These include:

Aspirational capital, which is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or imagined barriers. Families that generate narratives of "what could be" seek to disrupt the status quo and create new possibilities for children's academic success.
Linguistic capital, which refers to the intellectual and social skills acquired through using more than one language. This recognizes the linguistic dexterity involved in switching between languages across different social contexts, storytelling, and communication through art, music, or poetry.
Familial capital, which recognizes the types of knowledge constructed within immediate and extended families. This includes knowledge related to care, economics, morality, socialization, academics, religion, coping, households, and professions, also commonly referred to as families' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al. 1992).
Social capital, which refers to the networks of people and community resources that provide instrumental and emotional support to manage institutions. Churches and community centers, for instance, may offer support for students in need of tutoring, SAT preparation, or finding out about scholarships.
Navigational capital, which relates to the capacity of individuals to maneuver through institutions that "were not created with Communities of Color in mind" (Yosso, p. 80). These qualities include being able to succeed despite working or learning in an environment that may be hostile to people of color and those whose primary language is not English.
Resistant capital, which refers to the skills and knowledge acquired when exposed to those who recognize and challenge inequality. This type of capital is evidenced when parents teach children to challenge the status quo and intentionally take on issues of social and racial injustice.

Identifying the different types of cultural capital within a community can be done in several types of inquiry-oriented projects. It is important to dispel deficit orientations about urban and underserved communities early in a teacher education program. This can be accomplished through projects that link teacher candidates with parents, students, and community members. In the LLC course, for instance, we invite students to complete a case study of a student within a community as part their school-based internship experience. Candidates are asked to gather some information about the student, his/her family, the community, and the school and are asked to identify the various forms of knowledge and cultural capital within students' homes and communities.

This kind of project has been instrumental in changing candidates' opinions about the students in underserved classrooms. Many indicate they had little knowledge or appreciation of the knowledge traditions that students in underserved communities bring to school, as reflected these candidates' post-course comments:

> Now I know that these students still have so much to offer to the classroom environment. Also many of these students' parents desire to be involved in their child's education. Many embrace the opportunity narratives and encourage their children to succeed in school (Amy, 12/3/13).
>
> Learning about funds of knowledge and different types of capital changed my opinion because I saw how much the students have to offer and how much potential they have (Lisa, 12/3/13).
>
> Before this class I never considered what economically disadvantaged students have to offer, but then I learned about funds of knowledge and the types of capital and how much all students can bring to the classroom (Steven, 12/3/13).

Some candidates, like Melissa, detected a strong emphasis on collaboration among the students in her classroom and learned from caregivers and students that this value was emphasized in students' homes:

> They emphasize supporting one another. When we are reading orally in our small group, if someone is struggling with a word or makes a mistake, the other students correct them before I get the chance to. They also are very quick to assist each other when someone doesn't understand a question. They go out of their way to help one another. Cultural capital teaches a sense of community and benefiting one another.

Beyond case studies, teacher candidates need to be involved in speaking directly with caregivers (Whipp 2014) in situations that allow for a reciprocal dialogues where both are contributing information about a student. Whenever possible, candidates should be involved in three-way conferences where candidates, students, and caregivers can all contribute stories about a student's learning and development. This is analogous to the "parent stories" project (Edwards et al. 1999), which involves gathering information from caregivers, first through open-ended questions (*Could you please me about your child?*) and then focusing on specific topics such as the child's interests, motivations, mentors in the immediate/extended family, academic practices at home, and caregivers' ideas about how best to support the child at school.

Throughout the TEP, there is a need for intentional investigations of family and community knowledge, and this needs to be supported by an overarching

reconceptualization of what counts as legitimate knowledge. While it is important to address the structural and institutional factors that advantage some at the expense of others, teacher educators must provide experiences that will help candidates acquire more nuanced understandings of families and communities and their positive contributions to education. This is vital information for helping candidates' draw from family and community knowledge to inform their teaching. Helping candidates understand the complicated ecology that impacts students' academic achievement and the rich reservoir of cultural capital found in their homes and communities is essential for developing a capacity view of students and identifying as a student advocate and teacher activist.

4.3 Learning How to Be Student Advocates and Teacher Activists

TEPs are challenged to address the ideological and practical tensions between K-12 education and the goal of educating teachers for social justice. High-stakes testing and scripted lessons are driving instruction in most schools today, and this will continue to be the case with the adoption of Common Core State Standards. Many of our preservice teachers at SJU struggle with whether the tests used to measure their students' growth are fair. As guests in their cooperating teachers' classrooms, they lack the power and authority to question established policies. Therefore, they emerge with very little experience debating issues around testing and scripted teaching, as well as other issues of opportunity and access in their schools.

Teacher educators need to help teacher candidates explore what activist work might look like in these contexts. They need to address what teachers can do in situations where they are required to enact practices that seem to undermine their students' learning. Preparation for these situations might involve role-playing ways to talk to colleagues and administrators about the impact of these practices on their students or providing them with specific strategies for helping them negotiate these practices.

In class, teacher candidates could discuss a number of challenging scenarios such as these:

1. What can you do when there are no books in the school that represent students' culture, experiences, or heritage?
2. What can you do when teachers are expected to teach according to a script that does not allow much room for individualized teaching?
3. What options do you have when most of your students are reading below grade level?
4. What could you do if you find that standardized testing is raising the level of anxiety among the students in your classroom?

To accompany these discussions, it would be important to include profiles of different teachers who model advocacy behaviors. The book *Bridging Literacy and Equity* (Lazar et al. 2012) includes a story about a teacher named Abby. Abby was frustrated while observing her 6th graders react unresponsively to the Corrective Reading program mandated in the school. The rote word-recognition lessons were meaningless to the students, and many refused to engage. Abby found it unacceptable that students were missing out on the kinds of authentic and individualized literacy instruction they needed, especially when they would be entering high school in a few years. She collected evidence in the form of student surveys, assessments, and anecdotal notes which all demonstrated that Corrective Reading was not working in her classroom. Abby shared this with her principal, who, by the way, strongly supported the remedial program. She also joined with other teachers to push for the elimination of Corrective Reading. Within a year, Corrective Reading was removed from the list of mandated practices for grade-level teachers after it was established that the practice did not move students forward in their development.

After sharing this case with my own teacher candidates, I invite them to write a reaction, list some questions they have about the story, and then we debrief. Among the many “take away” points, candidates discover that teachers, even novice teachers, can advocate for students and make fundamental changes in school policy. They also notice that advocacy requires systematic data collection so that decisions can be made based on documented evidence. Finally, candidates discover that it is possible to have reasonable conversations with school leaders about what is and what is not working instructionally and the strategies they might employ when they disagree with school policies.

It is also important to engage candidates’ fears about feeling powerless as novice teachers. Among many of the novice teachers I know, fears about job security and being ostracized from other faculty often prevent them from acting in the best interests of students. I always remind candidates that school leaders may not always agree with them, but I have never found it to be the case that a teacher was terminated because she wished to have a reasonable conversation with a school leader about her students’ learning.

Along with these discussions, it would be important to invite candidates to inquire about student advocacy in their own field settings. They need to speak to their cooperating teachers to find out how they advocate for students. Such inquiry projects are in keeping with Zeichner’s (2010) call to position teachers as authentic sources for knowledge about teaching.

Most important, candidates need to be placed with teachers and supervisors who model caring and advocacy, and they need opportunities to practice these behaviors (Athanases and de Oliveira 2008; Athanases and Martin 2006; Whipp 2014). And while teacher educators need to help candidates develop identities as educational activists (Portilio and Malott 2011), it is important to remember that teachers work in complex communities. TEPs should demonstrate what teacher advocacy looks and sounds like, but it is equally important for teacher educators to work

collaboratively with teachers and school leaders to create communities of change within schools (Timmons 2007).

TEPs should monitor the development of candidates' dispositions in the areas of caring and advocacy. Caring translates into a number of observable behaviors such as interacting positively and respectfully with students, setting high expectations, and accepting students' approximations. The teachers in this book described other actions that constitute caring, such as providing students with extra help before and after school, reaching out to caregivers, importing books to enhance classroom libraries, listening to students talk about their challenges and experiences outside of school, and by constantly honing their craft. It may be difficult for teacher candidates to exercise all of these options, even when they student teach, but it is important that teacher educators provide them with many opportunities to enact behaviors associated with caring and advocacy.

All of these recommendations depend on teacher educators establishing strong partnerships with knowledgeable, equity-oriented teachers in underserved schools (Fecho 2000). To do this work, teacher educators must learn from and with teachers who are involved in advocacy work.

4.4 Learning About Culturally Sustaining, Critical, and Balanced Literacy Teaching

Given some of the differences in teachers' knowledge and skill in literacy instruction that surfaced in the narratives, TEPs need to strengthen candidates' preparation in literacy. This would involve having candidates spend more time learning about students with diverse literacy profiles, providing candidates with intensive experiences assessing students' literacy abilities, and working with candidates inside classrooms to organize instruction around students' diverse literacy needs.

Within these classrooms, teacher educators and exemplary cooperating teachers would work together to show teacher candidates how to provide balanced literacy instruction that is a good instructional fit for each child. Teacher candidates need to be provided with opportunities to manage differentiated literacy instruction through the use of individualized and small-group formats (Pressley and Allington 2015; Taylor et al. 2000). If all TEPs committed to these goals and held high standards for each candidate's performance, they would be able to provide schools with new teachers who would be better positioned to teach successfully from day one.

In TEPs with strong liberal arts requirements, however, there is not much room in the education program for a concentration in literacy studies. Most undergraduate programs require two or three courses in literacy instruction and children's literature. An alternative plan is for TEPs to add a fifth-year advanced certificate option that allows teacher candidates to gain expertise in literacy assessment and

instruction. This kind of program helped Clare develop the expertise she needed to design literacy curricula to meet the needs of her students in Phoenix.

Teacher educators need to address what critical and culturally sustaining literacy practices look like and why they are important. Embedding culture into literacy teaching not only validates students' lives and heritage, but it is also integral to helping students relate known to new knowledge (Lee 2007). Teacher candidates also need to learn about the culturally situated nature of literacy, how literacies and languages differ across social contexts, and how to connect students' knowledge traditions with the official knowledge of school. In addition, candidates need to understand the purposes and practices of transformative teaching (Banks 1999) and that literacy can be a tool for naming, questioning, and solving problems of inequality (Freire and Macedo 1987). Having students use literacy for these purposes makes it not just a classroom exercise but a vital part of functioning in a democracy.

Some key tenets of Common Core State Standards, including the promotion of critical reading, writing, and greater exposure to non-fiction books, are consistent with a balanced approach to literacy instruction (Calkins et al. 2012). These standards are driven by equity motives because they hold expectations high for all students and purport to honor teacher decision-making about *how* to teach. Teachers who bring their knowledge of students' lives, heritages, and communities to CCSS are best positioned to deliver a robust and relevant curriculum. On the other hand, teachers with strong equity orientations will question standards-driven testing policies and practices that they feel undermine their students' learning. For teacher educators, the challenge is to foster teacher candidates' knowledge of standards across different content areas while also helping them develop the inquiry and advocacy stances they need to question and revise their teaching efforts and the policies/practices of their schools.

While many teacher candidates are introduced to concepts of culturally sustaining and critical pedagogy in their courses, they are not explicitly shown how to apply these concepts to real school materials. What candidates need are explicit demonstrations of how to teach in critical and culturally sustaining ways using the standards-aligned materials typically found in schools. There is a need to bring school textbooks and curriculum guides into college classrooms to show candidates how to negotiate the curriculum and find ways to integrate cultural knowledge using these school-based materials.

Beyond demonstrations in the college classroom, candidates need actual opportunities to plan and teach with these practices in mind, and they need opportunities to reflect on these practices. One useful tool for guiding practice and reflection is the Culturally Responsive Instruction Observation Protocol (CRIOP) (Powell et al. 2014). The CRIOP is an instrument that can be used to assess a number of skills and orientations associated with culturally sustaining teaching. While this instrument has been used primarily with practicing teachers, it could also be used to capture the specific ways teacher candidates develop in the areas of care, respect, maintaining high expectations, and a variety of instructional practices that balance cultural knowledge with academic skills. The instrument provides explicit

examples of what constitutes effective teaching practice in a culturally responsive classroom and juxtaposes these with examples of what a non-responsive classroom might look like. Two sample indicators are provided in Table 1:

Table 1 Two sample indicators from the culturally responsive instruction observation protocol (CRIOP) (Powell et al. 2014)

Indicator	For example, in a responsive classroom	For example, in a non-responsive classroom
Instruction is contextualized in students' lives, experiences, and individual abilities	• Learning activities are meaningful to students and promote a high level of student engagement • Materials and real-world examples are used that help students make connections to their lives • Learning experiences build on prior student learning and invite students to make connections • Teacher builds on existing cultural knowledge and "cultural data sets" • Instruction is culturally congruent with students' culture and experiences • Materials and examples are used that reflect diverse experiences and views • Families' "funds of knowledge" are integrated in learning experiences when possible	• Learning tasks and texts reflect the values and experiences of dominant ethnic and cultural groups • No attempt is made to link students' realities to what is being studied; learning experiences are disconnected from students' knowledge and experiences • Skills and content are presented in isolation (never in application to authentic contexts) • Families' particular "funds of knowledge" are never called upon during learning experiences • Teacher follows the script of the adopted curriculum even when it conflicts with her own or the students' lived experiences • Learning experiences are derived almost exclusively from published textbooks and other materials that do not relate to the classroom community or the larger community being served
The teacher focuses on developing students' academic vocabularies	• There is an emphasis on learning academic vocabulary in the particular content area • Students are taught independent strategies for learning new vocabulary • Specific academic vocabulary is introduced prior to a study or investigation • The teacher provides many opportunities for students to use academic language in meaningful contexts	• Little attention is paid to learning academic vocabulary in the content area • New words are taught outside of meaningful contexts • Students are not taught independent word learning strategies

Note the inclusion of indicators that both balance incoming cultural information (instruction is contextualized in students' lives, experiences, and individual abilities) with academic standards (the teacher focuses on developing students' academic vocabularies). By having these indicators clearly defined in the protocol, candidates can be more conscientious about appropriating these teaching practices. Instruments like the CRIOP could be used in methods courses that incorporate tutoring and small group teaching assignments and in student teaching when candidates are given substantial teaching responsibilities. Rebecca Powell (personal communication, 12/3/14) recommends that teachers videotape themselves so that they and/or teacher supervisors can view and review the videos to reflect on the candidate's performance.

Videotaping and discourse analysis projects help candidates consider how their teaching practices align with the principles of social justice teaching (Vetter et al. 2013; Mason and Phillips-Galloway 2012). Amy Vetter asks her preservice teachers to videotape two lessons and select a 10-minute clip from these tapes to post on a private virtual space to share with their small group. Then they dialogue with each other about their analysis. Her students use positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990) and discourse analysis (e.g., turn-taking, questioning, tone, and amount of talk) (Gee 2005) to examine how they positioned themselves and their students and how students positioned them during instruction. One recent addition is that she models how to talk about race, class, gender, and sexuality before they discuss the videos in their groups. Vetter observed that her students' discussions about how those identity markers shape teaching was much richer after her modeling. For example, Trisha admitted that she disregarded the question about such issues in her written reflection because she did not think that identity markers shaped her teaching practices. However, after watching the modeled discussion and talking with her classmates about her video analysis, she realized that both her race and gender shaped her daily classroom interactions. As an African American female teaching African American students, she mentioned that she was able to serve as a role model by taking on the position of a "strong Black female." She also realized that she built stronger relationships with her male students and therefore sought advice about how to make more connections with her female students.

TEPs not only have a role in creating critical educators, they also have a role guiding teacher candidates to continue their learning after graduation. According to Ritchie (2012), TEPs do not generally provide teachers with the networking tools they need to sustain their development as critical educators. Richie studied the experiences of eight teachers who had either created progressive, activist educator groups or joined already established ones such as the National Writing Project, the National Coalition of Education Activists, Teachers for Social Justice, Rethinking Schools, and Teaching for Change. Richie found that these groups served as incubators for propelling teachers to choose careers in education and they have been instrumental in sustaining teachers' commitment to social justice education.

TEPs need to help candidates connect social equity and critical caring to literacy teaching. Teacher candidates might be methodologically proficient and knowledgeable in the theories and practices of literacy teaching, but if they do not know

or critically care about students, it will be difficult for them to teach successfully (Lazar et al. 2012). Also, if they do not know how to sustain their commitment to social equity teaching by participating in supportive teacher networks, they may be vulnerable to test-driven policies that narrow the curriculum and emphasize "one-size-fits-all" teaching practices.

5 Conclusion

There needs to be a universal commitment among teacher educators to create literacy teachers for social equity (Lazar et al. 2012). Based on the most recent research in teacher development, and my own experience as a teacher educator, I have recommended that programs include experiences that help candidates: (1) examine issues of privilege, subordination, and the sociopolitical factors shaping school achievement; (2) uncover the knowledge traditions of students, families, and communities; (3) explore what student advocacy and teacher activism looks like; and (4) teach literacy in culturally sustaining, critical, and balanced ways. These ideas need to be explicit in foundations, methods, and capstone courses. They need to be embedded in TEP classrooms as well as school and/or community-based internships. The course experiences described in this chapter emphasize discovery, reflection, collaboration, and inquiry. Candidates are positioned as intellectuals who actively construct knowledge across various discourse communities (university, school, community). Teacher education programs need to document their impact by studying the developing dispositions, knowledge, and practices of teacher candidates and the graduates of these programs (Murrell et al. 2010). All of this requires teacher educators to consider their own identities as teacher educators for social justice, take stock of their current programs and find spaces to include and or revise programs around the four dimensions, and set an agenda for change. To improve educational opportunities for kids in high-poverty underserved communities, teacher education programs need to commit to preparing knowledgeable, skilled, and equity-oriented teachers for every classroom.

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Sound Advice from Teachers to Future and Practicing Teachers

Leslie M. Reich, Rachael Chou, Megan L. MacTurk, Clare Rachko and Tracie L. Sanlin

Abstract The early career teachers in this book give advice to a new wave of hopeful teachers, starting with the need to reflect on what they need to learn and do to give students the best of themselves. This chapter addresses some of the key elements in the narratives, such as teachers' strong investments in their own learning and working within the restrictions of school structures and policies that contrast with teachers' ideas about sound teaching. The teachers speak in plain terms about the steps that are needed for future and early career teachers to grow professionally and enact social equity teaching practices, especially those who teach in historically unjust contexts. Their recommendations fall into four main categories: (1) creating and sustaining relationships, (2) maintaining high expectations, (3) seeing the truths of their contexts, and (4) taking care of oneself.

Keywords Advice · Growth · New teachers · Social equity practices

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1 Introduction

This book has offered the unfiltered perspectives of teachers as they experienced their daunting, frustrating, and rewarding first years teaching in underserved communities. They have not only lifted the academic achievement of historically marginalized communities, but they have worked to overtly challenge classroom and societal inequities that permeate today's public school systems. They have discovered truths about working in underserved districts and worked to practice culturally sustaining pedagogy. And now, as they are no longer novice teachers, they pass the torch to a new wave of hopeful teachers who choose to teach in urban contexts in order to be the change they wish to see.

It is difficult to itemize a list of "best practices" shared by all effective teachers in all contexts. Instead, this chapter presents some best practices of urban teaching that account for and validate the perspectives and experiences of culturally marginalized groups. Although the realities of these teachers' experiences have differed by geographic region, student demographics, pedagogical methods used, amount of administrative support, and levels of instructional independence, they share certain abstract and practical advice for a common purpose: to guide new teachers toward social equity education in historically unjust contexts. They are not intended as a script for good teaching; rather, they are designed to expand pedagogical scholarship to include habits, skills, and mindsets involved in good teaching that are incorrectly assumed to be independent of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic.

2 Reflection

After learning about the dispositions, knowledge, and skills that allowed our five teachers to begin to make a positive difference in their under-resourced classrooms, we now ask you to reflect on what you are currently doing and thinking about to make a difference for your students. What do you think you will need to learn, and do, and know to give your students the best of yourself? We hope these narratives prompted you to think about where you are developmentally and professionally as a teacher for social justice and where you might go. Instead of dispensing advice about how you might acquire the habits of mind and action that align with a social equity orientation, we refer you to the next chapter where teachers speak to you in plain terms about what next steps you can take to grow professionally. In the meantime, we can share a few ideas about getting the support you will need to teach in underserved communities.

You have probably already noticed that the teachers in this book invested heavily in their own learning, primarily through reading the professional literature and seeking the advice of colleagues, mentors and parents. Curiously, professional development sessions were not a primary factor in their learning. This begs questions about the relevance and quality of professional development, and how

teachers might work with teacher mentors and school leaders to direct their own professional learning. Professional development is most relevant when it is based on teachers' particular observations, inquiries, and challenges. Advocate for the types of professional development you need while also understanding that more senior teachers have a lot to teach.

Advocating for one's professional development is one challenge, but what do you do when some of the structures and policies in your school are contradictory to your own philosophy of teaching? This was the case for Megan and Tracie, who, as a result, prepared students for standardized tests using the instructional approaches they believed would work best for their students. When we think about their cases, we are reminded of Cochran-Smith's theory of social justice (2010) in that part of being a teacher for social justice is to acknowledge the tensions and contradictions that emerge from competing ideas about the nature of justice and be able to manage these tensions in imperfect but concrete ways. According to some, standardized testing is supposed to result in greater justice for students. After all, educators can help students only when they know what their needs are, as reflected by these tests. Yet Megan and Tracie tried to work with the standardized testing policies of their schools by using some of their own informed approaches. They were not often recognized for their efforts to provide students with fuller conceptions of literacy than their programs dictated.

The question for you is what to do in situations where there is little to no flexibility to modify instruction in the ways you see fit. Teachers in these situations need to be careful data collectors, analyzers, and theorizers about how their classroom practices are working with particular students, as is consistent with an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). If some students are either being left behind or are disengaged by one-size-fits-all instruction, it is time to gather evidence. It will be useful to gather data on students' levels of engagement, their questions, and their written/oral responses to the assignments, and you will need to do this for at least a few weeks. If you find that students are consistently disengaged, or that instruction is either far below or far above some students' skill levels, it will be apparent that learning is being compromised in your classroom. You will then be able to share this data with teacher colleagues and mentors and invite discussions about what to do. If several teachers in your school make similar discoveries, all of you will be in a better position to advocate for changes in school policies and structures.

3 Teacher to Teacher

The teachers profiled here offer a wide variety of advice: mindsets to adopt, ways to maintain your sanity as a first- or second-year teacher trying to stay afloat, and practical advice for getting through the day-to-day without losing sight of the bigger movement. This advice falls into four main categories, which you will see repeated throughout their excerpts below: (1) creating and sustaining relationships,

(2) maintaining high expectations, (3) seeing the truths—both beautiful and exasperating—of your context, and (4) taking care of yourself. These educators assert the importance of building mutually supportive relationships with administrators, colleagues, families, parents/guardians, and, of course, the students themselves. They understand that teaching the whole child takes a village of workers and that the first step in teaching the whole child is to know the whole child. They understand the importance of keeping the high bar set in its place, even when accomplishing the task seems impossible. They know that social justice teaching cannot last without a clear, honest vision of the challenges and triumphs of their contexts. And they know that, if the best thing for kids is to keep committed teachers in the profession as long as possible, then these committed teachers must find a way to make the work sustainable. In the pages that follow, you will find useful, applicable, and well-intentioned advice that you can mold into your own practice—in short, you will find sound advice.

3.1 Leslie: Build a Strong Knowledge Base

If I could travel back in time and write a letter of advice to myself as a first-year teacher, I would suggest that I (1) be an expert and an authority, (2) know my students as people, (3) cultivate relationships, and (4) take care of myself.

First, be an expert in your content area and strive to become an authority in your classroom. It is important to maintain up-to-date knowledge of pedagogical practices to bolster the literacy skills of your particular body of students. Read Kylene Beers' *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do* (2002), Richard T. Vacca and Jo Anne L. Vacca's *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum* (10th ed., 2010), Cris Tovani's *I Read It, But I Don't Get It* (2000), Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton's *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language* (2005), Ruth Culham's *Traits of Writing* (2003), and books by Harvey Daniels. Also very helpful are Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis's *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement* (2007), David W. Moore et al.'s *Developing Readers and Writers in the Content Areas K-12* (2010), and Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell's texts on leveled and guided reading.

You can become an authority by understanding that kids do not have to like you (there will undoubtedly be some students who won't), but they must respect you. So much of classroom management oftentimes revolves around fear. As Rafe Esquith points out in *Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire: The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56* (2007), teachers are afraid of not being liked, of looking bad in front of their colleagues, of being disobeyed, and of feeling out of control in front of students. Kids, in turn, are afraid of public humiliation, of getting answers wrong, of appearing stupid, and of facing parental consequences. The way to increase achievement and for everyone to feel more comfortable in the classroom is to replace fear with trust. I believe that the way to build trust is to be fair, transparent,

and genuine. Strive for consistency and enforcement of expectations. Be transparent; kids should know that there are no secrets to doing well in your class. Let them know your job is to give them the skills they need to be successful in college and beyond. You are sympathetic and reasonable; your expectations for behavioral and academic choices are high, yet attainable. Be genuine; kids can "smell" when you don't mean what you say. Read Doug Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College* (2010). Mean it when you tell them—every single day—that you believe in them. Admit when you don't know an answer to a question and reveal how you're going to find it. Model your enthusiasm for learning; they'll meet your level of excitement.

Second, know your students. You will only be able to teach the whole child—meeting his/her intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs—if you know the child as a person. Take the time to get to know your students in a low-key setting. Hang out with them at recess; sit with them on the subway; volunteer to chaperone field trips. Discover their interests. The idea is to capture some of the experiences of their lives and find ways to weave these into your curriculum. Learn about the challenges, beliefs, values, and responsibilities students may have that affect them in the classroom. But don't pry. Read Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish's *How to Talk so Teens will Listen and Listen so Teens will Talk* (2006) and Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012). Ascertain which other adults impact the students' lives: grandparents, neighbors, religious leaders, and soccer coaches. You may need to depend on one another for the support of a child. Remember to bring humility to these conversations; other adults in a child's life have known the child far longer than you have and will have a ton of insight to offer, if you are willing to listen. "It takes a village."

Third, cultivate relationships. Via phone, email, and in-person visits, develop relationships with parents and guardians to form a tripod of teamwork among you, them, and the students. Begin with the assumption that all parents/guardians want what is best for their kids, although you may disagree on what that "best" is or the route to achieving it. Call homes with positive messages as often as possible; it makes the families and students feel good, and it makes you feel good, too. Keep in mind that caregivers themselves may have experienced the achievement gap or may not have been schooled in the American education system. As such, they face their own set of challenges in supporting their children: they may not speak English, they may work multiple jobs, they may not be confident in their own academic skills to help with homework, or they may feel marginalized by the school. Approach all encounters with parents with respect.

Take the time to study poverty; you will be far better equipped to speak with parents/guardians and will develop stronger empathy if you learn about the socioeconomic circumstances that impact them. To explore ideas in race and class, read Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (1995) and *Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children* (2013), Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting*

Together in the Cafeteria: And Other Conversations About Race (2003), articles by Sonia Nieto, Michelle Alexander and Cornel West's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012), Claude Steele's *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (*Issues of Our Time*) (2011), Alfred Lubrano's *Blue-Collar Roots; White Collar Dreams* (2005), Jonathan Cobb and Richard Sennett's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1993), and Ron Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* (1999). To explore the achievement gap specifically, read Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991), *The Shame of the Nation* (2005), and *Letters to a Young Teacher* (2007).

Build relationships with school leaders. Make it clear you will work hard and be a team player. Be honest and genuinely optimistic. Assume the best in others and approach all situations from a solutions-oriented attitude. Get to know your colleagues and allow them to get to know you. Develop a close relationship with at least one colleague. Find a mentor if your school doesn't automatically assign one to you. You need someone who can give you constructive feedback, someone to whom you can ask your "stupid questions," and someone who can help you navigate how to obtain resources. Read Patrick's Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (2002) and Jim Collins's *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap … And Others Don't* (2001). Carry the culture of respect to all adults who enter your campus, including custodians, secretaries, and visitors. Anyone who puts in an honest day's work deserves respect, and your students will follow your lead.

As should hopefully seem obvious, consuming these resources is not nearly enough to build a strong classroom or establish a career; you must discuss theory with colleagues and try new ideas that are supported by pedagogical literature, but also don't be ashamed to use a practice that has proven effective—there's no need to reinvent the wheel when other teachers have paved the way. Although nothing can replace personal experience in your individual context, a strong knowledge base is a necessary place to start.

Finally, take care of yourself the best you can. Only stress about that which you can control. The achievement gap is connected to other issues like healthcare, law, sanitation, transportation, gang injunctions, drugs, access to weapons, nutrition, psychiatric care, teen pregnancy, and other realities. You can only control what happens in your classroom—maybe your students will create other types of social change. Be flexible. Expect that at least one big change will occur in your school each year. Be protective of your time. Take a day off when you need to. Say no to responsibilities that you cannot commit to doing well. Don't be afraid of constructive conflict. Forgive yourself when you make mistake. Model how to handle imperfection. Read Maia Heyck-Merlin and Norman Atkins's *The Together Teacher: Plan Ahead, Get Organized, and Save Time* (2012). What is best for students is for you to be able to teach for as long as possible. Do what you can to make the job sustainable so that you can do it with all your passion for as long as you can.

3.2 Clare: Let Students Show You What to Teach

First and foremost, take the time to know your kids and learn from them. My students were bursting out of their green polo shirts and khaki pants with culture. I just had to have the willingness to embrace their cultures in my teaching. One change I would make from previous years would be to take steps to make families more accessible. With a language barrier, communication can be even more difficult than usual. But in fostering relationships with parents and guardians, I found so much more success for their children. They shared beautiful stories and welcomed me to hear about the other side of my students' lives. My experiences were humbling and enriched my ability to teach their children. I knew how to build my literacy instruction because of what my students taught me. Their stories intertwined with the ones to which I opened their eyes. I came to realize the importance of listening and not doing so much talking. The classroom has to be about them, down to the picture book you choose before lunch or dismissal. They showed me what to teach. They will show you the way more than any anthology, manual, or textbook ever could.

One of the single most important things you can do for yourself is to find a mentor, even if he/she is not someone assigned to you. I did not have one; I had many, although I sought them out myself. I maintained relationships with different people for different reasons, all of whom helped me survive. It takes a village to raise a child. In school it takes an entire staff to teach a student. Don't be Wonder Woman or Superman, thinking you can do this alone. It's not a sign of weakness to ask for help. Don't we encourage our students to ask questions? One behavioral psychologist also told our faculty at one of our meetings to use the phrase Q-TIP, Quit Taking It Personally. Following that faculty meeting, I then had a cohort of faculty who sent envelopes of Q-tips to my classroom as not-so-subtle reminders that I needed to stop acting like such a nut case and calm down. But in more professional terms, you can't take stress home with you, or it will consume you. I am still avidly trying to learn exactly how to do this, but I have begun to come to terms with the fact that I only have control over the school day and what happens during those hours. I have to be okay with that, or I will lose that as well.

Just as you do with yourself as a teacher, and yes, as human being with a life, teaching in the current climate requires that you find a balance. I was fortunate; I had state and diocesan standards to adhere to, but how I taught and met those objectives was of my own accord. My principal emphasized reading and math and approved most avenues to get there. I reveled in my ability to be creative and really teach and reach my students, but I know the reality of the situation can be quite different. Compromise and find your own in-between. Don't lose yourself, and don't lose your job. You are there for your students: you are there to mentor, to guide, and to teach. Infuse yourself in all you bring to the table in your classroom, but pick your battles. If you want to teach, you need a job, and yes, there are teaching opportunities out there where you have the freedom that we grew up with. There are diamonds in the rough, and there are principals that are more than worth

their salt. I had one, plus an amazing assistant principal, plus a one-for-all, all-for-one staff. I was a lucky duck of a first-year teacher, but in many cases, you might have to work to get there. Don't get discouraged; your skills and your students are worth the climb.

But my favorite and the most critical piece of advice is this: don't fear teaching outside of the box. That's where the fun and the magic happen. It can be scary, especially when you look out upon a sea of blank stares or you have to answer questions you don't even know how to answer. You don't always have to have the answer; you just have to be open to the questions. It is good to confront issues in a controlled environment. Doing so makes for constructive conversations and open-minded revelations, even in first grade. And compromises come when you can infuse the skills you need to teach into great literature. Find those books that speak to issues in your classroom while also still remembering the academic needs of your students.

My year in Phoenix changed my life, from my skin's ability to handle heat to the different shape of my heart and soul. My educational philosophy was molded and altered to better fit me as a teacher. Since I fell head over heels into a terrain I had never known, I needed to acclimate quickly to survive. I had taught in Philadelphia, then I had to teach in Phoenix. There was no question: it was my choice and a job that had to be done.

The stories affect me in such immense ways that I cannot revert to the person or teacher I once was. I am fortunate to have acquired educators to guide me along in my teaching-learning journey. First, there was Medea, among other Philadelphia friends, and I now have Malinal, Bernardo, Acilina, Jorge, and on and on and on. It is as if they each hold a space as a tattoo on my teacher heart. Because of them, I teach differently. I approach students knowing that they have a story underneath their adorable exteriors, and I know that it is my job to teach them and maintain high expectations. As gut-wrenching as it is that I cannot change some of their situations, it would be a further detriment to allow these circumstances to dictate my classroom management or discipline. Yes, I invited their stories into my literature block, but I controlled it and ultimately made it a positive experience. As hard as it was to face tearful explanations of misbehavior, I knew the outcome of a functioning student in a classroom environment was of greater importance, and that has to win in both Phoenix and Philadelphia.

I also know not to overlook their stories or brush them off simply because they are not in the curriculum. Your students' lives are the most important teachable moments you will find, and that is something I am willing to fight for. They need to feel valued and to hear someone understand them so that maybe they can better comprehend themselves. I now know I can be that person, advocate, and ally.

Beyond that, I learned a lesson in working with a team of teachers. There will be opposition, even if it is just a personality conflict, which can still surely mess up your day. But one thing I can always rely on is my kids. They are my driving force, so if I am pushing and pulling, yelling and screaming for them, it is worth the uncomfortable aftermath. That always passes with time. Even in literature, conflict

can brew pleasant and worthwhile results, so take it as a learning opportunity. You can never just be a teacher; you have signed up to be a life-long learner as well.

3.3 Rachael: Study Poverty

Before you take a job in an underserved community, take the time to study poverty so you have some understanding of your students' home lives. You can study it up close by spending time in these communities. I would also recommend reading books such as *Savage Inequalities* and *Letters to a Young Teacher* by Jonathan Kozol and journal articles such as *The Development of Occupational Aspirations and Expectations among Inner-City Boys* by Thomas D. Cook, Mary B. Church, Subira Ajanaku, William R. Shadish, Jr., Jeong-Ran Kim, and Robert Cohen (1996). Other great articles include *A School that Fosters Resilience in Inner-City Youth* by H. Jerome Freiberg (1993) and *The Cooperative Elementary School: Effects on Students' Achievement, Attitudes, and Social Relations* by Stevens and Slavin (1995).

It is important not to assume that you know why children are acting in certain ways. Instead, ask questions in a respectful way: "Can you tell me about that?" "Why did that happen?" "Is there something going on today?" Your students will have a lot of things going on in their lives that you might not know about or have experience with.

Be sure to educate yourself about the cultural practices of your students. Find out the background of the kids who go to your school, ask questions, and look things up on the Internet. Get to know your families as much as possible. Be friendly, give out your cell phone number, stay late, or come in early to meet family members if that is when they can see you.

A really important thing for me was befriending more experienced teachers. I created an unofficial mentor for myself when I met a master teacher who was now tutoring at Honor. We get along well, and I look to her for advice and information about students, families, and the school itself. Find allies you can talk to and ask questions of. Don't be afraid to ask questions! Even if you are in a great school, you still need some friends you can count on and commiserate with.

Always maintain high expectations for your students. Know that kids in high poverty communities are the same as all other kids; many just face more challenges and obstacles in their daily lives. Show your kids how much you believe in them and that you don't only *think* they can do well, you *expect* no less from them. Your kids will rise to meet or exceed your expectations, and you will be thrilled with what they can do.

Last, have faith in yourself that you can make a difference. You can be the person a student feels safe with. You can be the person who instills confidence in a kid who thinks he will always fail. You can be the person who makes your students want to come to school. You can be the person who shows love to a difficult child. You can be the person who listens to your students. You can be the person who

celebrates a small but hard-fought victory. You can be the person who leads by example. You can be the person who creates a safe environment for kids who are lost and scared. You can be the person your students can count on. You can be the person who changes lives. And you will see it every day. You will see your kids grow and blossom and change in ways you didn't think possible. You will get to know kids and families and get them to trust you. You will watch your students make connections and realize they can do things they didn't think they could do. You will hear your own words repeated back to you and know that what you say to your kids every day is important. You will see that you being you is just what your students need.

3.4 Megan: Build Relationships and Listen

Stay true to yourself and why you decided to work in urban education. With all of the politics involved in education today, it is easy to get sidetracked by mandates and policies that detract from providing the highest possible level of education. Do what you believe is best for your children at all times. If you strongly believe something may take away from the education you desire to give your students, communicate with your administration and work on options for resolving the situation.

Things can get very overwhelming, and it is easy to feel lost in the whirlwind of urban teaching. It is important to take time for yourself. It is kind of like when you're on an airplane and they're going through the safety procedures, and they tell the adults to put their masks on before putting masks on their children. An unhealthy, exhausted, and emotionally drained teacher is not going to perform at his or her peak. Know your limits and when *not* to volunteer for that one extra chess club night if it means you will be able to perform better in the classroom later.

Build relationships with your students and parents. I always immediately call or try to communicate in some way with my children's parents/guardians. Education is teamwork; it truly does take a small village to raise a child. You may not agree with every adult's parenting styles, but you must try your hardest to work as a team for the sake of the child. Find opportunities for adults to volunteer in your classroom, and communicate often with them. Be sure to communicate for positives, not just when their child misbehaves. Take the time to get to know your students. Your children will respect and trust you more when they know you have their best interests at heart. From an academic standpoint, getting to know a child is crucial to providing an excellent education to him or her.

Be proactive. Getting to know your students is the first step in preventing possible disagreements. There is always a reason why a child acts out. For example, this past year, I knew a student who lived with his grandmother who let me know that his father returned from jail. When I spoke with the student the following morning, I asked him how he was feeling, and he told me that he was quite angry. We came up with a plan of squeezing a squishy ball while sitting in the library for

five minutes. Using this simple proactive strategy, I am sure we avoided several severe altercations.

"Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Whether you are religious or not, these are precious words to live by as a teacher, particularly one who works with children in high-poverty areas. You are going to hear about and witness a lot of things that will shake you to your core. You cannot change every detail of your students' lives, and you cannot change the entire educational system in one day. But letting go of those details you cannot change and focusing in the things that you do have the power to change for the better will make you a better teacher. Focus on you as a teacher, your classroom, and the educational experience you are providing. You should not forget the things you cannot change. Those details are important to consider, but do not bring yourself down trying to change things that are out of your reach. Find the serenity, and gain the wisdom.

3.5 Tracie: Focus on the Entire Child

After finishing my first year of teaching, I reflected on the progress I had made and realized that I had not succeeded in the ways that I thought that I had. After spending four years teaching middle-school-aged children, I have learned that doing so tends to bring out one of two responses in people: either they will cave and give up, or they will find a way to take control of their classrooms and teach. I do not always win, but with every day I stand in front of my students, I start to "win" more.

At the end of my first year, I believed that I had won, but many of my students did not. They walked out of the doors of my classroom without the foundational skills necessary for success in high school. Those are the kids that leave and you know that they still can't read or write a complete sentence, or even communicate basic thoughts so that their voices can be heard. Carrying that sense of failure or that feeling of having broken the explicit or implicit promises that were made to their families is a heavy load and can change you in ways that can be hard to describe.

That is the difficult reality of teaching I face at the end of each year. Did I walk into my classroom and do everything that I said I was going to do? Did I uphold the explicit and implicit promises I made to my students' families about what I was going to give them? And finally, did my students walk out better prepared for the next chapter in their school careers and lives than when they entered? These are important questions to ask yourself. While we live in a world that is driven by data, test scores, and meeting the next mandate, being a teacher is more than how many of your students were proficient on the state test or how good their essays were. It is about asking yourself those questions and evaluating how well you served the entire child.

This realization has helped me understand that I had not won the war but perhaps I had started to win some battles for my students. When you work in the

communities that we work in, there are many problems outside the school doors that impact what happens for the sixty or ninety minutes students are in your classroom. To be the most effective teacher in the communities that we work in, you have to become a member of the community that surrounds the school. You need to be vulnerable in front of our parents and their children. Often my parents have had very negative experiences with schools as students and as parents. Schools had become places in which they themselves were left behind. And now their children couldn't read, couldn't do math, and didn't seem to be making any progress towards the goals they had set. I have found that sharing my own story helps parents see me as a partner in the work of educating their children.

When you take the time to learn about your students' cultures and understand what goals their parents have set for their children's futures, you instantly become more capable of helping them achieve those goals. It also shows that you are invested in them as people and increases their trust in your motivations and actions. With the trust of parents, students, staff, and community leaders, you become armed with one of the most powerful weapons a teacher can hold: the power of strong relationships. If you build strong relationships, students will be willing to hear the difficult truths about what they need to do to reach their goals. If you combine those tools with the unrelenting belief that your students can learn, will learn, and will be successful, you have every tool that you need that can't be taught in a classroom. With these beliefs and tools, any time you find yourself in front of my students, in front of your students, in front of our students, you will have a chance to make the difference in that child's life. This is what they deserve.

4 A Final Word

You've already gathered that it takes a lot of knowledge and practice to do what these teachers did in their first few years of teaching. It also takes experience. Most of the teachers had some prior experience in underserved communities either before attending or while attending college. It is important that you get this experience. Recall Clare's experience with Madea. Clare was challenged to win Madea's respect, an experience that was pivotal to her sense of efficacy and her ability to teach in other underserved communities. This experience gave her time to struggle, reflect, and make approximations—experiences that are so necessary to one's growth. Clare found it advantageous to remain in the same school setting over a four-year period, staying long enough to build key relationships with students and their caregivers. There's also something very powerful about taking mission-related trips to underserved communities where you can be immersed in learning about intergenerational poverty and the factors that shape it. Megan, for instance, visited Appalachia and other high poverty communities. These excursions were filled with opportunities for her to get to know community members and reflect on issues of poverty and social inequality. If you currently attend college, seek out these opportunities for yourself.

You've also probably gathered that developing certain dispositions, knowledge, and skills requires not only direct experience in the field but also a heavy commitment to your own learning. Although they did not boast about it, these teachers were intellectually curious and highly accomplished university students. They had established philosophies of teaching and learning that guided their lesson planning and curriculum design. They had developed some notions about classroom management, but most of these teachers found this the most challenging aspect of their jobs. They were continually fine-tuning these strategies within their classrooms. To varying degrees, they had developed some pedagogical strategies for teaching literacy, although they were challenged to address the wide variety of literacy needs that different students presented. The teachers also came to their schools having learned some things about different cultural communities and themselves as people of a particular cultural orientation, but they continued to learn about these things when they began to teach.

If you are majoring in education, it is important that you construct understandings about the big principles that guide teaching and learning, but it is also vital that you acquire strategies for managing a classroom and teaching children with many different social and academic needs. The teachers discussed many types of challenges: an overemphasis on standardized testing, coping with limited resources such as books and other materials, students who read several years below grade expectations, students who are missing from school for long periods of time, and students who are suffering emotionally and socially. It is also important to seek out courses that address these issues and pay special attention to the successful ways teachers have supported students in these settings. It is also important to learn as much as possible about different cultural communities, social inequalities, social equity teaching, culturally sustaining teaching, and critical pedagogy. Last, it is critical that you have opportunities to reflect on and confront your own culturally influenced ways of seeing students and underserved communities. This is vital in order to recognize and nurture students' academic potential.

Getting into the mindset of and consistently striving to make a difference in your students' lives requires tremendous work. The teachers profiled here have provided some advice for getting through those first few tiring years. They have suggested that you develop and nurture relationships, maintain high expectations, see the truths of your context, and take care of yourself. Although forming positive and open relationships with students might be obvious, these teachers have stressed the idea that getting to know your students is not "in addition" to teaching them content. Getting to know your students as people and teaching them academic content are so intricately linked that they cannot be separated. All of these teachers highlighted again and again the importance of understanding and teaching the whole child. Studying poverty, talking to children in low-stakes settings, and truly learning to listen to what children have to say will guide students towards trusting you. If your relationships with students are based on trust, you can teach them to master any content you want.

These teachers underscored the blessings and insight that accompany relationships with parents, guardians, and families. As teachers, we must remember that

children enter our classrooms spontaneously; they come from families that have high hopes for their children's futures. And these families are expecting us to deliver on the promise that accompanies any teacher's job: to love the children until it hurts and give them the academic tools they need to be whatever they want to be when they grow up. Families and teachers want the same thing. Therefore it is important to approach communication through the lens of commonality. You play different roles in the children's lives, but those roles must work in tandem in order for kids to learn.

Some of the teachers also discussed the importance of cultivating relationships by illustrating the benefits of forming positive relationships with colleagues. Colleagues can feel like your saviors: they provide resources, they make you feel better after a tough day, they give you examples to follow, they give you advice on your teaching, they regularly demonstrate best practices, they are your biggest cheerleaders, and they can be close friends. The work of being a social justice teacher is simply too difficult to manage if you feel like an island. In any school where you work, regardless of how you feel about your administration, testing, or curricular freedom, there are other teachers who have walked in your shoes and can show you the path toward excellence. Find those teachers and cling to them with all your might.

Forming and preserving these relationships is a reciprocal process with maintaining high expectations for yourself and for your students. Consistently striving for excellence builds your reputation as someone who works relentlessly to help your students meet their potential. This reputation, in turn, becomes one built on trust, further solidifying your relationships. High expectations communicate your belief in the boundless potential of your students. Students will meet whatever bar you set for them; place the bar in the sky and they'll show you the stars.

Although there is tremendous overlap in the advice these teachers have offered, each context is truly unique. Schools vary dramatically in every facet of education: size, location, demographic, leadership structure, staff culture, curricular independence, student work expectations, etc. What works in one context may not work in another. In selecting your school site, be sure to examine various aspects that will either mesh with or conflict with your values. Once at your school, be honest with yourself about the situation you face. Undoubtedly, there will be facets of the environment that you will question. Understand your realities; work within the ones that align with your values, and use your best judgment in determining how to advocate for a more just way of serving your students.

Although it may seem outside the realm of being an effective teacher, four of the teachers explicitly recommend taking care of yourself. This advice goes beyond the classic mantras of getting enough sleep and eating right. These habits are important for anyone in any profession. Rather, these teachers recognize the unique challenges facing new teachers working in high-poverty schools whose days extend far longer than others may think. These teachers field phone calls from students requesting homework help and parents requesting updates on their children at all hours and on all days of the year. They completely overhaul Wednesday's lessons at 10 p.m. on Tuesday because less than half the students mastered Tuesday's

lesson. They arrive at and leave school in the dark hours of the day. They suffer from laryngitis, are continually dehydrated, often go without lunch, and frequently spend the entire day on their feet. Your students depend on your ability to bring your A-game every single day. Do whatever you can to avoid burnout.

All of this advice not withstanding, avoid allowing the minutiae of the day-to-day to cloud your vision of making a difference. You have entered this work because you want to make of typical schooling a more just world. Make this advice your own: distinguish which parts apply to the administrative, cultural, and demographic context in which you teach, tweak it to make it subscribe to your personality and style, and think critically about how you can mold it to promote educational equity. The more you think critically about how you can best serve your students, the better you will be able to invite your students to think critically about how they can change the world.

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