

# Unpacking Teachers' Narratives: Dimensions of Social Equity Teaching Revealed

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**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 discomfiting 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 establish 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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