Degrees Toward Social Justice Teaching: Examining the Dispositions of Three Urban Early-Career Teachers

Althier Lazar

Abstract Teaching for social justice means understanding students and advocating for them. These dispositions are especially critical for those who teach in urban communities where low-resourced schools and deficit perspectives toward students prevail. While many teacher education programs claim to prepare teachers for social justice (Zeichner in Teacher education and the struggle for social justice. Routledge, New York, 2009), it remains unclear how program graduates actually think and act according to social justice principles. This study focuses on the dispositions of three, early-career teachers in relation to Cochran-Smith's (The international handbook of educational change. Springer, New York, 2010) theory of social justice in education, and some of the background and contextual factors that shaped their ability to enact social justice teaching practices. Case studies, largely based on teachers' written narratives, reveal differences in their orientations toward: (1) caregivers, (2) students' knowledge traditions, and (3) their ability to raise students' critical consciousness. The two teachers who were most evolved in their demonstrations of social justice teaching grew up in families where service to others was highly valued. The study also demonstrates how two of the teachers managed in school contexts where scripted teaching and high stakes testing were enforced, and how these conditions factored into one teacher's departure from her position. Findings from this study indicate how teacher education and professional development programs can be strengthened to develop and support teachers' social justice orientations.

Keywords Social justice · Urban · Teacher dispositions

A. Lazar (✉)
Department of Education, Saint Joseph's University, 5600 City Line Avenue,
Philadelphia, PA 19035, USA
e-mail: alazar@sju.edu

Introduction

Respecting students and challenging the inequalities that undermine their learning are fundamental principles of social justice teaching (Cochran-Smith 2010). Enacting social justice principles requires that teachers see students' fullest capacities and their own responsibly for nurturing them. These dispositions are especially critical for teachers who work in underserved communities where low-resourced schools and deficit perspectives toward students prevail. Relatively little research has been done to understand the dispositions of teachers who graduate from teacher education programs that espouse social justice goals, or how these teachers continue to be shaped by professional practice. This research focuses on three early-career urban teachers who graduated from such programs and the ways their dispositions aligned with social justice principles. Findings from the study can guide the design of university and professional development programs.

Perspectives

The concept of "social justice" in teaching emerged in response to educational inequalities that undermine the achievement of students, and particularly those from high poverty culturally nondominant communities. Over the last decade, many teacher education programs have included the language of social justice in their mission statements and program brochures, but there has been little consensus across programs about what this concept means and how to help teacher candidates understand and enact social justice goals (Zeichner 2009). This lack of program consistency resulted in a call to strengthen the theoretical base in this area. Cochran-Smith (2010) proposed a theory of social justice to guide teacher practice and teacher education that focuses on:

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. directly acknowledging 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).

These principles can be enacted in schools through critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Critical pedagogy centers on interrogating dimensions of schooling, education, and pedagogy for democratic aims (Freire and Macedo 1987). It is focused on helping students understand the social inequalities that have shaped their own and others' lives, and how they can use the tools of literacy to offset these

injustices. Culturally relevant pedagogy centers on raising students' social consciousness, but it more explicitly addresses students' academic success and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings 1995). Grounded in research on cultural match (or mismatch) between students and teachers (Mohatt and Erickson 1981; Phillips 1983), culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on understanding students' cultural scripts and using this information to modify instruction to enhance student achievement (Au 1980; Ladson-Billings 1994). More recently, Paris (2012) called for the term culturally *sustaining* pedagogy to emphasize the need to "perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 95).

Funds of knowledge, teaching in the third-space and *cultural capital* are key concepts in culturally sustaining practice. Based on research done with Mexican–American families in Tuscon, Arizona, researchers established *funds of knowledge* as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household functioning and well-being" (Moll et al. 1992, pg. 133). By drawing from these knowledge traditions, teachers can create conceptual bridges for students to relate the known to the new. This relates to the notion of *teaching in the third space*. According to Gutiérrez (2008), the third space is "where teacher and student scripts—the formal and informal, the official and the unofficial spaces of the learning environment—intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge." (p. 152). Such shifts require that teachers validate the knowledge that students bring to school. This depends of questioning the dominant stance that nondominant groups lack the cultural capital needed for school success and social mobility (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Yosso (2005) challenges teachers to consider the rich sources of cultural wealth that exist in Communities of Color. She describes *aspirational, linguistic, navigational, social, resistant, familial* and *linguistic capital* as forms of cultural capital that can be used to transform education and empower students.

Recognizing students' knowledge traditions and cultural capital is central to enacting critical and culturally sustaining teaching practices. Whether these ideas are translated into practice is largely dependent on well-prepared teachers who recognize their responsibility to offset injustices through their teaching and advocacy efforts (Darling-Hammond 2010). Underlying a social justice orientation are dispositions about oneself, students, and teaching. Dispositions include the beliefs, attitudes, values, and commitments that support the democratic agenda of equitable access to achievement for every student (McDiarmid and Clevenger-Bright 2008). Some of the dispositions that align with social justice goals are evident among highly effective urban teachers. These teachers tend to prioritize student learning, link theory and practice, relate well to students, endure the challenges of urban high poverty settings, and have good organizational abilities (for a complete listing, see Haberman 2005). Similar 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 high poverty communities, and (4) positive views of their own teaching effectiveness (McKinney et al. 2008). This research finds that

older individuals (over age thirty) and non Euro-American teachers (typically African American, Latino, members of a minority group or from a working class white family) have the highest potential to become effective and committed to urban teaching. This research supports the need to select teachers with these qualities rather than relying on teacher education programs to produce such teachers.

While better teacher selection efforts are warranted, many urban districts with high teacher attrition rates often employ those most available and willing to work. Often these include white, monolingual, and inexperienced teachers who may bring with them deficit orientations towards students in high poverty communities (Sleeter 2001). Research finds that deficit thinking continues to be prevalent among today's preservice teachers, despite the fact that they are more aware of cultural diversity and more accepting of multiculturalism than their counterparts were three decades ago (Castro 2010). Castro's meta-analysis of preservice teachers' dispositions indicates that many have not acquired the complex understandings that would prepare them to serve students in culturally nondominant communities, primarily because they are blind to the structural and institutionalized inequalities of schools and society that shape students' access to achievement. Lacking these understandings, future teachers are 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).

Teacher education can play an important role in advancing teachers' understandings about issues of social justice in education (Enterline et al. 2008), but not all teacher education programs are equally invested in the goal of preparing teachers for social justice (Zeichner 2009). Also, there are many factors that impact teacher teachers' orientations to social justice that are not generally considered when designing such programs. Candidates enter teacher education programs with varied experiences and exposure to social justice concepts (Garmon 2005), which then impacts their selection of and experiences within teacher education programs. When they exit these programs and begin to teach, their particular schools and districts will influence their ability to enact practices based on this orientation. If the goal is to produce teachers for social justice, then teacher education/professional development programs need to be informed by research that takes these factors into account.

This study focuses on the dispositions of teachers in relation to Cochran-Smith's (2010) theory of social justice in education, how they came to be involved in this work, and some of the school factors that either constrained or supported their ability to enact social justice teaching practices. Analysis of their interviews and written narratives reveals distinctions among teachers in key areas and these findings can be used to strengthen teaching practices and teacher education programs toward social justice goals.

Methods

This qualitative, interpretive study focuses on three urban early-career teachers who sought teaching positions in urban communities and remained devoted to their work

after at least 2 years of teaching. Written narratives and follow-up interviews were the primary data sets used to explore teachers' dispositions. I compared these data with the understandings needed to enact social justice principles described by Cochran-Smith (2010). Narrative research, based on the idea that one's understandings are made meaningful through stories, privileges the voices of teachers but also allows for the interpretive voice of the researcher (Phillips 1997). It captures participants' meaning perspectives and the multiple and complex social contexts that have shaped them (Denzin 1989).

Participants and Context

Since the focus of the study was to learn from teachers who were committed to urban teaching, I searched for participants who: (1) chose to teach in an urban, high poverty community upon exiting their initial teacher preparation program, and (2) continued to be committed to their positions after their second year of teaching. Establishing their continued commitment to urban teaching after the second year was important since teachers who show high levels of frustration and self-doubt tend leave these positions within the first 3 years of employment (Johnson and Birkeland 2003). In addition, I looked for teachers who had participated in teacher education programs that claimed to have a strong social justice mission.

Five graduates of an urban-based university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States were initially identified for this study. Located adjacent to a large urban setting, this university transmitted its social justice mission through: (1) an educational foundations course that addressed social inequality in society and schooling, (2) pedagogy courses that addressed culturally responsive and critical/transformative teaching practices, (3) direct work with children and teachers in several urban school internships, and (4) faith-based campus campaigns and projects. Three of the graduates demonstrated a commitment to urban teaching through their involvement in an alumni dinner group for urban teachers sponsored by the university. Two others delivered speeches about the significance of their work in urban schools at the university's student teaching commencement ceremony.

To expand the list of study participants beyond this university, I learned of two other teachers who participated in the Teach For America program through a contact at a neighboring university. TFA asserts a strong social justice mission. According to its website (http://www.teachforamerica.org), the program focuses on closing the achievement gap by sending recent college graduates into underperforming schools for a two-year commitment to teaching. The program includes a five-week intensive summer training program where teacher candidates study issues of societal and educational inequality, teacher leadership and activism, and the knowledge and work habits of highly effective teachers. Candidates also teach summer school students for a few hours each day while being coached by experienced teachers. TFA provides novice teachers with additional on-line support during their first 2 years of teaching. While some studies show the effectiveness of TFA teachers who stay in teaching and become certified, more than 80 % of TFA graduates leave the profession by year 4 as compared to one-third of those who

attend traditional 4-year teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond 2010). Both teachers had been teaching in high poverty communities for 4 years, 2 years beyond their TFA commitment, and planned to continue teaching.

After analyzing data from all seven teachers, I focused on three of the teachers whose profiles revealed interesting areas of contrast: Nicole, Leslie and Tara. Leslie and Tara participated in the Teach for America program, and Nicole graduated from the urban-based, traditional 4-year teacher education program. My selection of Leslie and Tara should not be construed as an endorsement of TFA since they had developed strong social justice inclinations prior to their participation in the this program. Leslie, a white teacher who identified as Jewish, was raised in an upper middle class community by parents who were actively involved in faith-based charity work. Tara, an African American woman from a middle-class family, felt a calling to continue her family's legacy of teaching in high poverty communities. By choosing Leslie and Tara, I was able to identify cultural and historical factors that shaped their dispositions. I selected Nicole because she shared race and class affiliations with Leslie. Both white teachers grew up in relatively affluent mainstream communities, and attended teacher education programs with explicit social justice missions, yet Nicole was not raised with parents who explicitly engaged in charity-oriented work. Her teacher education program inspired her interest in urban teaching. Having Tara and Nicole in the study offered another interesting dimension of contrast. Both taught in schools that emphasized standardized tests and scripted programs. By profiling these three teachers, I was able to consider how factors such as culture, background, teacher education, and school environment shaped their orientations toward social justice.

Data Collection

Data collection took place in the summer of 2011. Teachers were asked to compose narratives structured around the following questions:

1. Describe where you teach and how you came to serve students in this community. How did you become interested in teaching in this community? What factors impact your commitment to this work?
2. Describe your overall mindset toward your work. What are your fundamental beliefs about teaching/learning, particularly regarding literacy?
3. Describe the challenges you face in helping students develop in literacy. Please describe how you work to overcome these challenges.
4. Describe the kinds of knowledge that your students bring from their homes and communities. How you build on this knowledge to help students achieve in literacy?
5. Describe how you feel working with children and families in these communities.

Participants were given 6 weeks to respond to these questions and were encouraged to illuminate their responses with specific stories or anecdotes. Each teacher produced a narrative between 9 and 11 pages in length, resulting in 74 pages of documentation. In reading each document, I identified responses that required

additional clarification through examples, anecdotes or stories and asked teachers to supply this information. I also asked additional follow-up questions concerning teachers' effectiveness and their future plans via telephone within 1 month of receiving the narratives. These interviews were transcribed and yielded an additional 18 pages of data.

Analysis

I applied the open coding and concept-generalizing techniques that typify grounded theory research (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Using Hyper-Research software, I read and coded the narratives and interviews according to teachers' beliefs, understandings, practices/actions as they described themselves, schools, students, families and communities, teaching, and society. This resulted in 7 primary and 90 secondary codes (Sect. Appendix, Sample Chart "A"); each code was linked to one or more statements in the narratives and interview transcripts. Many codes were common to all or most teachers, but several were distinctive. I then developed charts to more clearly identify differences between the teachers across a number of categories, including their dispositions toward students, families, students' literacy and language abilities, themselves as teachers, and their descriptions of culturally sustaining teaching. These charts include by own commentary and quotes from teachers' narratives (see Sect. Appendix, Sample Chart "B"). In comparing teachers' profiles, I discovered variations between teachers in relation to social justice principles, and as a result, selected three of the teachers to profile. I created vignettes to showcase each teacher's stances toward students, caregivers, and teaching, and some of the factors that shaped their perspectives.

Findings: Typical and Atypical Dispositions

All three teachers possessed many of the dispositions that align with social justice teaching. They described the inequalities their students faced, indicated beliefs in their students' potential to achieve, and discussed their passion for their work despite the many obstacles they faced. All commented that their students were unfairly disadvantaged by unequal educational funding and they all pledged their dedication to helping their students achieve, even if it meant tutoring them beyond the school day.

These teachers diverged most in their construction of caregivers, their consideration of students' funds of knowledge, and in their commitment to raising students' critical consciousness. There were also major differences between these teachers in their ability to make instructional decisions. While Leslie had the most authority in selecting instruction that fit her students' needs, Nicole and Tara were mandated to follow instructional scripts and both were told their jobs depended on their students' performance on standardized tests. Tara excelled at preparing her students for standardized tests and found instructional spaces where she could modify her teaching to help students succeed in school and beyond. Yet the rigidity of scripted teaching played a major role in her decision to leave her position and apply to a graduate program in urban school leadership.

Nicole: A Student Advocate with a Mainstream Orientation

Nicole is a white woman entering her third year as a fourth grade teacher at Bradley Elementary School. Bradley is an urban school in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. It serves 98 % African American students, 80 % of whom receive free or reduced school meals. While growing up in an affluent suburb in the northeast, Nicole always wanted to be a teacher but did not imagine that she would teach in an urban school someday. She attributed her passion for teaching to her parents who encouraged her to "follow her dreams." She declared herself an education major and interned at an urban public school during her first semester. She became captivated by this assignment and decided to volunteer at the school over the next 3 years.

Nicole described the students at Bradley as "eager students who are willing to learn but face many barriers to help them achieve the proper education. These barriers include their socioeconomic status and a lack of school resources." Bradley was known as an "Empowerment School" which meant that for two 45-minute periods a day, she and her colleagues were asked to read from a script to deliver literacy lessons. Standardized testing had a major influence on the students and teachers at Bradley. Nicole and her colleagues were often told that students' test performance would impact their jobs:

> There is a lot of stress on teachers with high-stakes testing—even though giving the students a test isn't the best way to test their knowledge. Teachers get the message from the school district: If you don't pass the tests—you are going to become a charter school and lose your job, so do whatever you need to do to pass the test. There are so many other aspects to these students' lives that prevent them from doing well on these tests—the demands are unrealistic.

These statements reveal a complicated position with respect to social justice principles. Nicole believed students' lives were inconsistent with the expectations of standardized testing. Stated this way, it was difficult to interpret her position as one of blaming students' lifestyles or one that recognized the systemic unfairness of testing. Other statements indicate that Nicole believed both factors undermined her students' achievement and she was determined to correct this disadvantage through supplemental instruction. Nicole stated there was little time during the regular school day to tailor instruction to students' individual needs, so she tutored selected students during lunch and after school. Acknowledging the social inequalities her students faced and offsetting these through her teaching efforts was consistent with a social justice orientation.

Nicole also took responsibility for the things she could directly control, such as creating strong links with students' caregivers. She communicated with them via telephone, met with them at school, and visited with a few caregivers in their homes. She was especially focused on the caregivers of students who concerned her most. This was the case with Antone, a boy she described as impulsive and verbally abusive. Through this communication she surmised that negative communication between Antone and his father might have shaped Antone's behaviors:

> I was having a very difficult time with Antone. He was threatening to "beat the shit" out of another student because he wouldn't stop reading aloud to himself during reading time. I had to call Antone's father who spoke to him on the phone and I could hear his father yelling and cursing, threatening to beat Antone when he got home if he continued to disrespect his teacher and asking him who the fuck he thought he was. How could Antone learn to respect and honor his teacher if he wasn't getting treated that way?

Realizing that speaking to Antone's father might have subjected Antone to another beating following this phone call, Nicole shifted all future communication to his mother who was eager to work with Nicole to manage her son's anger and impulsivity. Together, they collaborated on a behavior management plan that included recognizing times when Antone displayed tolerance toward his peers. Nicole also felt she had established Antone's trust. This vignette reflects Nicole's capacity to reflect on her actions, believe in Antone's potential to appropriate pro-social behaviors, and collaborate with Antone's mother.

Nicole also used contracts, incentives, and consequences to help other students achieve. This was the case for Darrell, a student who had difficulty sitting still in her classroom and was 2 years behind in reading. She learned that he loved to browse the web and so she offered to let him and his sister stay after school so they could read web pages on her computer. Nicole had Darrell sign a contract that stipulated he could stay after school as long as he did not disrupt the class. Nicole noticed that Darrell's behavior improved dramatically. On the few occasions when he did not comply with the contract, he was not allowed to stay after class. Nicole's ability to hold Darrell to a standard, based on her belief that he could improve, resulted in significant improvements in his behavior and in his academic work. This attracted positive attention from the other teachers:

> At the end of my time with Darrell, he began reading on fourth grade level. He needed to trust me, realize that I was giving, yet fair. He confided in me. Not only was I proud of him, but also the staff at Bradley rewarded him every minute they could. He was constantly receiving awards from other teachers who were shocked by his improvements. Every child can turn around. It takes time, consistency and love.

This vignette reflects Nicole's ability to establish a trusting relationship with Darrell. It also indicated her belief in his literacy potential, and her ability to advance his literacy development. Having accumulated many experiences like this by the end of her second year of teaching, she knew she could make a positive difference in her students' lives. Yet she wondered if she could make a difference because some questioned her ability to do so:

> So many people who learn about where I teach and the daily struggles I face, ask me: "Why do you think you can make a difference?" I've started to take offense to this question, because my overall mindset towards being an educator in a "challenging" environment has always been positive. Now, I don't always feel positive about my teaching job on every given day, or my administrators, or the school district, but when I take a step back and review

my "educational philosophy," my beliefs and goals are powerful and positive. There are days when I thought there is no way only I can make a difference in this environment. There are days where I want to scream and shake some sense into people around me. There are days where I cry out of pure sadness, worrying about the lives of my students.

Nicole challenged her self-doubts by asserting a strong and positive philosophy of teaching. Note how she identified the school district and administrators as being two of the factors that made her work more challenging. At the same time, however, she targeted students' peers, some caregivers, and the community generally for reducing students' opportunities for success. In the following statement she wrote that few others believed in her students as she did (underlined for identification) and that she had to work hard to counter the demeaning messages her students received:

Too often the expectations are lowered to meet the standards of the children I work with. My fundamental beliefs tell me that expectations are all these children have. I have to trust in them and KNOW they can achieve whatever they put their minds to. There is no reason that the education they receive isn't as valuable and rewarding as the education you or I received in our adolescence. I don't have a choice but to assure every child who steps into my classroom has the confidence and ability to be proficient in any task they put their minds to. Daily, they are told by peers and adults that they may not be good enough, strong enough, smart enough, and my job is to diminish those thoughts, for at least the time they are in the four walls of my classroom.

In this statement, Nicole displays her awareness of inequitable schooling and her role in equalizing opportunities for her students. Yet she frames "peers and adults" as negatively influencing her students' lives and therefore casts herself as the singular positive influence for them. Elsewhere in her narrative, she described her students' home lives as being "chaotic" and "unstructured," assertions based in part on information she gleaned from students and their caregivers:

There are days when children ask if they can stay after school with me until six or seven just to hang out because their mother doesn't get home until eight o'clock. Or there are times when I save my lunch for my student who I know hasn't eaten since the day before. Or there are days where I have ten children for lunch dates because they all are having a rough day and the meetings I have scheduled with their parents have been a consistent no show.

Other evidence suggests that Nicole evaluated caregivers from a perspective that privileges mainstream values and lifestyles:

When I was growing up, my conversation after school consisted of "How was your day today? What did you learn about? Let's do your homework together. What would you like for dinner?" It sounds like the norm, but many of my students go home to little or no conversation with their parents or siblings. I never realized how vital it is to converse with your family but it has shown great results in broadening the vocabulary and intelligence of young adults. These "funds of knowledge" are something that students lack coming into

their educational environment. Many children come to school with a plethora of life skills they have learned at a young age like how to defend oneself or take care of their younger siblings. I cannot say all students come to Bradley lacking knowledge; that would be unfair, but the majority of students come lacking school-valued knowledge. The yearning to learn and understanding of the importance of education does not seem to be a priority to most.

Nicole acknowledged students' *funds of knowledge* and focused specifically on two types of "life skills" knowledge: self-defense and childcare. She stated that her students lack the knowledge that is typically created through participation in mainstream discourses. While she distinguished "school-valued" knowledge from knowledge gained in students' homes, she did not describe how the latter knowledge could count as school-valued knowledge or how it could be used to inform her teaching.

Nicole's observation that most of her students did not prioritize education indicated a deficit perspective. Yet other evidence taken from Nicole's narrative reflected her capacity to challenge deficit orientations. For instance, she framed her students' language as "different" not deficit: "Students bring to the classroom ways of speaking and acting that are different from school-valued discourses." Also, she challenged assumptions about students. For instance, she discussed the need to evaluate each child on the basis of her own observations instead of relying on other teachers' descriptions of students:

> Many times, students come into a classroom for the first time with a reputation. A reputation that sometimes scares me and gets me ready for the "worst," but as I become more acclimated to these reputations that float around Bradley, I am realizing that I need to diminish them before they even walk in the door. Every child relates differently to different adults. Some children may have a challenging year with one teacher and a fantastic year with another. I have realized that I need to begin with a clean slate so far as I have ignored the "student profile" sheets that teachers fill out at the end of the year about each child. They can be misleading and at times so far off from the truth.

Nicole's disregard of the student profile sheets represents an attempt to challenge negative assumptions that she felt were often made about her students. Her conscientious desire to avoid forming misperceptions, her faith in students' academic potential, and the amount of time and effort she invested in developing students' abilities, all count as evidence that she wanted to create more equitable learning opportunities her students. However, her negative assumptions about students' lifestyles, family discourse patterns, and caregivers' priorities were inconsistent with a social justice orientation and they may have limited her consideration of students' funds of knowledge in teaching. These inconsistencies reveal a partially formulated social justice orientation. Nicole's dispositions and understandings contrast with those of Leslie and Tara, two teachers who more explicitly recognized and drew from students' cultural knowledge to inform their instruction and focused on raising students' critical consciousness.

Leslie: A Social Conscious Teacher Who Balances Literary Classics with Community Activism

A white woman in her mid-20's, Leslie began her teaching career in a high poverty district in Los Angeles, where she taught high school English to students who identified primarily as Mexican–American. After four years in this position, she transferred to a public high school in New York City that serves primarily Latino and African American students. Much of her written narrative was based on her work in Los Angeles.

Leslie believed her path toward urban teaching was forged in childhood. Her mother created an organization that supported child cancer survivors and family members were involved in charity work through their synagogue. She believed these elements played a key role in her understandings about inequality and her potential role in solving the problem: "As my family continued its public service through mitzvahs ("good deeds") we performed for others, I discovered a world in which equal treatment was not the norm, but that I could help to make it better."

Leslie majored in both English and History at a competitive urban university. In her junior year, she considered entering the teaching profession and applied to the Teach for America (TFA) program. Shortly after taking her first job, she realized she did not have the requisite knowledge of literacy pedagogy to help many of her students who struggled with reading. Through networking with her TFA peers, and reading the professional literature, she was able to develop teaching strategies that were successful with students. Unlike Nicole, Leslie was not expected to use scripted lessons and therefore had much more authority to make instructional decisions. Her oral and written testimonies indicated that she helped students become familiar with the literary cannon and raised their social consciousness about the need to learn it. She also discussed with her students the inequalities they faced and what she and they could do about it. In the first weeks of teaching she delivered a PowerPoint presentation titled, "How Did I Get Here," which explains the various factors that account for the achievement gap. The presentation included data from Jonathan Kozol's books *Savage Inequalities* and *The Shame of the Nation* and the first chapter of a 2007 Teach for America corps member resource book titled *Diversity, Community, and Achievement*. Leslie followed the presentation with several days of discussion:

> I encouraged dialogue 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 low expectations. After days of discussion, the students articulated better understandings of why their skills were subpar, realizing that they did not lack intellectual potential.

Leslie's teaching represents key elements of social justice teaching. In exposing her students to the social and educational inequalities that negatively affected their achievement in school, she challenged their negative beliefs about their academic potential.

Leslie felt her students had to recognize their inherent abilities and herself as their advocate before she could help them develop in literacy. She approached literacy teaching by addressing what she called a "literacy gap—a vocabulary gap, a number-of-books-read gap, and a schema/knowledge gap," she presented another interactive PowerPoint presentation titled "Why Read?" which began with the following statistic: "Forty percent of adult Americans experience difficulty interpreting basic documents, such as bus schedules, election ballots, apartment leases, and employment contracts." It also included statistics on the number of words students must read to reach 1 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."

Leslie's goal was to increase her students' exposure to print but she needed a well-stocked classroom library to accomplish this goal. She asked her parents to pack up her own bookshelves filled with middle and high school books and ship them to her in Los Angeles. She also arranged to have faith-based groups donate books to her classroom. As the books started to come in, Leslie had students organize them and she established rules and procedures for using the class library:

> I gave a mini-lesson on the "five-finger rule" (students to 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.

Leslie was determined to address students' "schema gaps" that she believed were a result of their prior schooling experiences:

> Most of my students—in both California and New York—have never been to the beach, have never been on an airplane, have never tried to grow a vegetable garden, don't know the difference between a state and a country, don't know the cardinal directions, and have never heard of the SATs. Thus, the achievement gap is also a schema gap, particularly regarding science and social studies, which have often been deemphasized in their previous schools in favor of increased instruction in math and English (which carry greater weight on state exams). This gap negatively impacts their understanding of texts and their ability to draw text-to-self and text-to-world connections.

Leslie did not accuse her students' caregivers or the community-at-large for gaps in students' knowledge. Instead, she pointed out how her students' schools had failed to teach them, especially in areas of science and social studies. Elsewhere in her narrative she recognized the values her students and their families possessed and considered how these could be tapped to help them develop in literacy: "They enter school having been steeped in the principles of hard work, dedication, pride, loyalty, and integrity. Such ethics help them achieve in literacy; if I tap into these values, I significantly heighten student investment in educational efforts." One way she drew

from students' knowledge is by having them identify and research social problems within their own community. One of her students, Charles, chose to focus on animal cruelty:

> His uncle had been the ringleader of illegal dogfights in the makeshift basement of his house. As a child, Charles had seen his uncle's friends starve their dogs and bet on fights to the death. Charles was disgusted with this dismissal of animal life. In his research, he discovered statistics around dog fighting, and theories for how to prevent it. To accompany his oral presentation, Charles built a diorama depicting the blood and gore of a dogfight that made even me look away. He was so inspired by the project that he chose to complete his high school volunteer hours at a local no-kill animal shelter. A few years later, he wrote his college application essay about how his volunteer experiences had shaped his perceptions of creating social change.

In addition to helping students expand on the narratives of their own lives, this excerpt also demonstrates Leslie's ability to help students use literacy to solve social problems in their communities. Often in these discussions, Leslie positioned students as activists by challenging them to be the change they wish to see:

> I challenge their desires to "escape" their neighborhoods. Wanting to leave falsely implies that their communities fail to offer them positive experiences. Additionally, I ask, "If you go off to college and never look back, who will still be here in 10 years?" 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 don't aim to imply that they must all return to their neighborhoods after college; rather, I aim to show that problems don't get fixed unless someone fixes them.

Note Leslie's reference to students' neighborhoods as offering them positive experiences. This statement suggests that she acknowledged the cultural capital within students' communities. Again, this reference is consistent with the social justice focus of respecting all social groups and validating their knowledge traditions.

Along with community activism, race and racism frequently surfaced as issues to be discussed in Leslie's classroom. She believed that open dialogue about these topics was essential for students' identity formation, and ultimately their learning: "Race permeates every interaction between students and me. The more comfortable we all become in discussing the fact that we are of different races, the more comfortable our classroom becomes for addressing issues of identity, and the more learning can occur." By facilitating discussions about race, Leslie aimed to help students acknowledge and challenge racial inequality.

Like Nicole, Leslie was interested in forging positive relationships with caregivers. She described forming a "tripod of teamwork among herself, parents, and students." Leslie's interactions with caregivers were guided by the following assumptions and rules:

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. Keep in mind that parents 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 and humility.

Note Leslie's ability to describe the multiple factors affecting caregivers. She articulated the educational and language difficulties impacting caregivers' ability to support their children's academic achievement. She also understood caregivers' less powerful position relative to educators and therefore emphasized the need for teachers to be humble and respectful. Her ability to capture the complexity of caregivers' lives and convey an understanding about their position fits with a social justice orientation.

As was the case with Nicole, Leslie also appeared to be respectful of her students' language. What distinguished Leslie's practice, however, was her use of students' language in the classroom as an instructional tool: "When possible and appropriate, we make comparisons to Spanish for those scholars who speak the language, which validates their own language while building background knowledge for acquiring new information."

Leslie's case reflects her strong social justice emphasis. Examples include: (1) teaching her students about the inequalities that have affected their school achievement, and in doing, helping them see their inherent potential, (2) focusing on student learning and achievement, (3) networking with TFA peers and reading professional books to improve her pedagogical knowledge, (4) importing books to maximize students' exposure to book language, (5) drawing from students' knowledge of community to create meaningful literacy campaigns and, in the process, transforming the official curriculum, (6) facilitating discussions about race, (7) seeing caregivers as essential and being sensitive to power differences between caregivers and herself, and (8) accepting students' home languages and using them to advance their language learning. In teaching her students about many mainstream literary traditions, she communicated students' capacity to master this knowledge and simultaneously challenged societal and school arrangements that held students back.

Tara: An Honorary Community Member Who Validates Students' Knowledge Traditions

An African American teacher in her mid-20's, Tara spent 4 years teaching middle school students in the southwestern region of the United States. The school served more than 2,000 students, many were first generation immigrants from Central and South America, and 99 % were eligible for free or reduced school meals. Her graffiti-covered school took up two city blocks and was surrounded by a nine-foot

fence topped with spikes. A keen observer of the community surrounding the school, Tara discussed how the conditions of poverty affected her students:

> The sidewalks would be littered with broken bottles, wrappers and a variety of trash. In the mornings our custodial staff would go out and clean the sidewalks but by the time school was dismissed the streets would be filled with trash again. The economic woes of my student's lives were not solely seen in their houses and sidewalks. It was 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 and pants that had to remain spotless as they were their only pair and shirts that were 3 sizes too big or 2 sizes too small.

This entry shows Tara's tendency to capture the significant details of her students within a high poverty urban community—a community that in some ways reminded her of the primarily black neighborhoods where her elders and many extended family members lived. Tara maintained strong ties with her grandparents and Godmother who taught in these communities.

Tara came from a long line of educators. This legacy began with her great-grandmother's decision to go to college in the 1930's to earn a teaching degree after the death of her great-grandfather. Tara underscored how her great-grandmother defied the odds of achieving this goal as a black, single mother living in the projects on the south side of Chicago. She raised Tara's grandparents who eventually became teachers and well-respected members of their community.

It is this history, and her specific experiences with race, that distinguish Tara from her counterparts Nicole and Leslie. While Tara was in elementary school, her parents moved from a racially diverse urban neighborhood to a primarily white suburban community where she attended a public school known for its high achievement and was enrolled in classes for gifted students. Tara was able to thrive intellectually in this environment, but visits to her Godmother's school made her realize that her public education was atypical for children of color. This prompted conflicting feelings about her racial identity:

> My first real understanding that I was getting something different in school than my friends was when I visited my Godmother's school. I didn't understand why that school had bars on the windows. I was confused when the students didn't have books or 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.

Transitioning between the worlds of her primarily white school and the black community of her extended family members, she began to see how racial injustices translated to unequal schooling for many students of color. In her narrative, she noted: "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?" Tara's family legacy in education and her unease about becoming detached from her racial community prompted her to consider a career in teaching that would enable her to make a difference for children of color.

Years later, Tara attended a competitive university in New England where she majored in music education. She remembered anticipating her first teaching internship with students of color, but the memory was tainted by her professor's blatant dismissal of these students' abilities:

> My professor was talking about the schools we would work in and I was excited thinking that I could head to a school similar to one that my grandparents taught at. 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." Those students were me.

Discouraged by this professor's condescending attitude toward students of color, Tara decided to drop her major in education and obtain a degree in the liberal arts. With college graduation looming, she decided to give education another try and was especially intrigued by TFA, a program for those interested in teaching in high poverty communities.

As a teacher, Tara followed the TFA dictum of assessment-based instruction: "As a Teach For America Corps Member it became ingrained that data was the key to having an informed practice." And so she vowed to be an astute observer of students and their written artifacts in order to serve their learning needs. She also believed that maintaining positive relationships with her students was key to their learning. To do this, Tara was focused on "being real" and creating a "safe haven" so that students would take risks with learning. She discussed her ability to laugh, joke, and display her own flaws in class. Like Leslie, Tara referred to her students as "scholars," reflecting the influence of the TFA program on the way both teachers framed their students.

Like Nicole, Tara was mandated to use scripted lesson plans. These were created by an outside agency, and her principal and teacher supervisor directed her to follow them closely. Referring to the curriculum, Tara stated: "There's lot of pressure to have kids read texts, but I'm proponent of having kids write. I do not have the freedom to make this decision although I have done things like the Manifest Destiny Project." Tara felt her supervisors focused too much on memorization and too little on having students analyze texts or connect personally with them. Her decision to add a project that focused on writing and social commentary (Manifest Destiny Project) reflects her ability to find and exploit an instructional space that would help her students grow as intellectuals. To Tara, augmenting the curriculum in this way was an issue of social equity. She felt the project would provide her students with the same critical-analytical writing experience that students in more affluent communities routinely get.

The inclusion of the Manifest Destiny Project also stemmed from Tara's belief that her students possessed many forms of home/community knowledge that are not typically valued in school:

While my students were not always well versed in a dominant schema, they had developed very sophisticated understandings regarding the realities of poverty, violence, multiculturalism, cultural heritage and racism. My students tended to have a broader range of experiences that allowed them to view class material and talk about the world around them in different ways.

Based on this belief, Tara's goals for her students included helping them become critically conscious citizens:

I didn't want to have a classroom of students that just learned a fact or details that were in an aim or a standard. When I said learn, I meant learn about themselves, their communities or a story that had previously remained untold; I want to create world citizens who are socially aware, who know the untold story of our country and are able to act based on these beliefs.

Tara's goal to create social aware students who understood themselves and their communities was realized through the Manifest Destiny Project. The project involved researching the acquisition of a territory by a group of conquerors. She asked students to find out what motivated the conquerors to claim the land, describe the native population of the territory prior to its occupation, and how the native people reacted to having their lands seized. Students often chose a region or country based on a family connection with that particular part of the world. Recognizing students' familial capital, Tara invited students to ask elders within the community to share their own personal histories with this topic. She described how one caregiver became engaged with the assignment:

It turns out this mom is from Haiti, and her daughter selected the Louisiana Purchase. In the 5 min of sharing why she was excited, she taught me more about a revolution and impetus for a sale than I had learned through 4 years of college. At the end of the project students were asked to interview a family member about their knowledge on the area that they studied. Students came back with pages of transcripts from home. Grandmothers who told stories of their grandparents' experiences of conquistadors arriving, or once being a part of a native population or 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.

This project reflected two elements of culturally sustaining teaching in the third space (Gutiérrez 2008): (1) power relationships between the teacher and parents/students shifted to one where Tara identified as a learner, and (2) new narratives were evoked in the cross-pollination of an official school concept (Manifest Destiny) and parent stories. Not only did Tara recognize and draw upon the familial capital of the surrounding community for the Manifest Destiny Project, but she also recognized the aspirational capital that many families possessed (Yosso 2005). She wrote, for instance, about one father's hopes for his daughter:

The families I've worked with have been insistent that their children learn how to read and how to read well. This is motivated by the hardships that they have

faced because of their own lack of skill in literacy. I once had a 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 may want in life. He didn't want his daughter to struggle throughout life because she was unable to understand the written directions, contracts or signs. It's interesting to think about the motivations propelling the parents of my students to promote reading. It's not that they necessarily have reaped the benefits from having strong literacy skills. In fact, in many cases—as in the story I shared above— it's quite the opposite. These up close and personal experiences with the result of not becoming a proficient reader provided my students with an additional motivation to become great readers and users of high-level texts.

Tara's communication with caregivers helped her understand that their investment in their children's literacy achievement related to their own inability to attain this for themselves. They communicated to her the costs associated with underdeveloped literacy skills. Tara was often able to exchange such stories with caregivers because they welcomed her into the community and many considered her to have close familial role in their child's life. She was often invited to birthday parties, soccer games, holidays and a variety of other celebrations within the community:

> I've had mothers of my students offer medicine when I was sick, bring food when they make their special dish, and allow me to sit at their tables and eat with them. The families that I have worked with will frankly announce that they consider me to be their child's mother, father, aunt, uncle, sister, bother or other relative when they are in my care. They trust that their child's teacher is going to give their child everything they need to be successful and fruitful in the world.

This excerpt indicates that Tara became an honorary part of the community. Through her interactions with caregivers, she was able to appreciate the cultural capital that existed within this community.

Although Tara augmented district-mandated lessons to create more equitable learning opportunities for her students, she could not change the standardized testing climate that prevailed in her district. She did, however, revise her teaching to maximize her students' achievement on these tests. Like Nicole, Tara believed her job status hinged on her students' test scores:

> If my school doesn't perform or meet certain testing mandates it will be taken over by the district or the state and we will lose control of our school. When the mandates are not met and your school becomes eligible for takeover, any teacher can be removed, your school may be broken into smaller schools and your administration will change.

Pressured to have all of her students pass the state's standardized test in history, she found that many of them did not know how to synthesize information in writing from primary documents, a task they would be required to perform on the test. Yet

she knew they could do this if they worked hard. For 2 months before the test date, she created graphic organizers and rubrics to help students plan their writing, had students write for several hours per week, provided individual feedback to students in and out of class, posted student writing samples and gave whole class feedback, and even spoke to parents about how they could give feedback on their child's writing. Tara insisted on success: "We maintained the narrative that it could be done and it would be done." Tara knew she had been successful when one of her most reluctant writers filled so many pages during a timed practice session that she had to ask for more paper. When the test results came back, Tara noted that her students performed among the top in the school in the areas of content knowledge and skill building.

Despite Tara's curriculum innovations, her insider status within the community, and her ability to prepare students for standardized tests, she decided to leave her job at the end of her fifth year of teaching to enter a graduate program that would prepare her to be a school administrator. She felt this new role would allow her to improve the quality of urban school leadership: "I had met teachers doing incredible jobs, but not so many administrators. I figured, what if we put more people who are fantastic as teachers and make them administrators? What if I could bridge those two things?" Tara was also frustrated by the restrictions placed upon her as a teacher. She complained about the lack of freedom to teach according to her beliefs, and even noted that she had been chastised on several occasions for failing to teach to the script:

> My principal would say to me: "Why aren't you on this aim on this day? Why are your kids reading for 10 min instead of 20? Why are you not giving them more directions/instructions? Why did you re-write your aim?" I got lots of negative feedback even though I got very good test results. I was among the top three teachers in the areas of content and skill building.

According to Tara, a lack of support and positive feedback, a rigid and restrictive teaching environment, and her negative impressions about urban school leadership were all factors that contributed to her decision to leave her teaching position and seek a career as an urban school administrator. These negative factors outweighed her strong achievement results and her close and rewarding ties to students and the community.

Summarizing Differences in Three Key Areas

The vignettes revealed differences between the teachers in three key areas: constructing caregivers, recognizing and drawing from students' knowledge traditions/cultural capital, and raising students' critical consciousness.

Constructing Caregivers

Nicole's comments about students' caregivers were contradictory. She provided many examples of positive communication with her students' caregivers, yet tended to disparage students' home lives and non-mainstream discourse patterns. Instead of viewing her students' "unstructured" and "chaotic" lives from the broader

sociological perspectives of poverty and inequality, she defaulted to deficit-oriented statements about parents and parenting in the community. Nicole made these statements despite her fruitful collaborations with parents, suggesting that she confined her negative comments to a select group of caregivers. Leslie, on the other hand, displayed sensitivity to parents even though she not did describe specific instances of communication with them. She acknowledged the power relationships between caregivers and teachers, and understood the circumstances that affected many parents' ability to support students. Tara was distinct from the other two teachers in that she established strong social ties with several students' caregivers. These bonds strengthened her understandings of students and exposed her to levels of cultural capital in the community.

Recognizing and Drawing from Students' Funds of Knowledge/Cultural Capital

All three teachers observed that their students lacked certain kinds of school-based knowledge. While Nicole recognized differences between school-valued and home-valued knowledge, she did not validate students' knowledge traditions within the official curriculum in the ways that Leslie and Tara did. Leslie discussed her students' "schema deficits," but blamed this on their prior schooling experiences. She did not blame parents or the community-at-large for the gaps she observed in their knowledge. Tara acknowledged her students' lack of some school-based knowledge, but indicated that her students made up for it by bringing a "broader range of experiences" to school and more nuanced social and cultural perspectives to books (than perhaps mainstream students). She stated her desire to have students "learn about themselves, their communities, and the world." As an honorary member of the community, she recognized familial and aspirational forms of cultural capital through her interactions with students and caregivers.

Raising Students' Critical Consciousness

According to her narrative, Leslie explicitly addressed issues of power, inequality, institutionalized racism, and poverty in her classroom when she helped her students understand the academic achievement gap. One of Tara's stated goals was to help students become "critically conscious citizens." Her Manifest Destiny Project was directed toward help students understand a history of social oppression through the stories of elders and others in the community that students knew. Nicole did not provide evidence that she raised her students' critical consciousness, but was critical of the practices and policies mandated in her district.

Discussion

Social justice teaching promotes equitable learning opportunities for all students and challenge inequitable practices, policies, labels and assumptions (Cochran-Smith 2010). All three teachers indicated they went above and beyond to advance their students' learning, yet they challenged inequalities differently. Nicole challenged

equitable practices by refusing to form opinions about students based on the profile sheets she was given at the beginning of the year. Leslie explicitly exposed her students to the social and education inequalities that affected their literacy achievement and provided them with the literacy tools she believed they needed. Tara challenged her school's standardized curriculum through emphasizing writing instruction and finding curricula spaces that validated students' knowledge traditions.

The second principle of social justice teaching is to respect all social, racial, cultural groups by challenging factors that reinforce their oppression (Cochran-Smith 2010). Evidence suggests these teachers respected their students and set high expectations for them. Nicole, however, sometimes attributed students' school failure to deficits in parenting and home discourse patterns rather than seeing failure within the larger sociological and historical systems that disenfranchised her students' caregivers. This matches Castro's (2010) finding that teacher candidates tend not to see the structural and institutionalized inequalities of schools and society that shape students' access to achievement. Yet Nicole's case complicates the research because she identified the different societal and schooling factors that limited her students' access to education. What may have been missing in Nicole's dispositional tool kit were understandings about the societal factors that impact some caregivers' ability to support their children's school achievement and her own power position relative to caregivers. Without recognizing families' knowledge traditions and community assets, it is uncertain how Nicole could see her students' fullest potential.

Differences between Leslie and Tara were finer-grained. Leslie wanted to give students what she had as a child, but she also valued the knowledge her students brought to school and helped students build onto this knowledge so they could transform their communities. She aimed to form a "tripod of teamwork among herself, parents, and students" with the presumption that parents were a vital part of the school achievement formula. She held empathetic perspectives toward caregivers and understood the importance of treating them respectfully. Tara's respect for the knowledge traditions of students in high poverty communities was tied to her own and her elders' experiences in these communities. As a new teacher in a primarily Latino community, she cultivated social relationships with students' caregivers and therefore was well positioned to understand and appreciate their knowledge traditions and cultural capital.

Third, educators teaching from a social justice perspective acknowledge and deal with the tensions and contradictions that surface in the face of competing ideas about justice (Cochran-Smith 2010). This was perhaps the greatest challenge for Nicole and Tara who taught in schools where high stakes testing and prescriptive teaching limited teacher decision-making. Each teacher handled these conflicts differently. Nicole did not challenge the mandated testing and teaching practices of her school, even though she felt standardized testing lacked relevance. Rather, she opted to do a number of things (parent communication, supplemental support, readings and projects based on students' interests) to help her students succeed. Nicole also had to defend her choice to teach in a high poverty community because some in her social circle questioned her ability to make a positive difference. She was able to deal with these tensions by trying to sustain a philosophy of positive thinking, but these efforts took an emotional toll on her. Tara did not challenge the testing practices, but rather

defied the labeling that normally results from such testing by preparing her students to do well. She challenged her supervisors' emphasis on reading by including daily writing instruction; these teaching efforts translated to achievement gains for her students. Tara also saw spaces within the curriculum to integrate assignments like the Manifest Destiny Project, which honored students' knowledge traditions and helped them think critically about societal oppression. Her unwillingness to adhere to her school's policies, the punitive responses of her supervisors, and her desire to change the system, factored in her decision to leave teaching. In order to reconcile competing notions of justice within this restrictive environment, Tara felt she had to leave teaching and become a school leader.

These findings add to the research on teacher development and selection. First, Leslie and Tara were exposed to issues of social inequality and service as youth and these factors shaped their interest in teaching in high poverty urban communities. This is consistent with research on factors outside of teacher education influencing teachers' commitment to urban teaching (Garmon 2005). Additionally, Tara's experiences with and insights about racial oppression factored into her capacity to form alliances with students and their caregivers. Her story fits with the research that suggests teachers of color tend to be effective urban teachers (Haberman 2005). However, Leslie's ability to acquire a strong social justice orientation and Nicole's steadfast commitment to teaching and her potential to grow complicates the research on teacher selection and the role that teacher education programs play in affecting teacher development. Leslie attributed much of her professional growth to the TFA program that provided the ideas, texts, and peer networks that helped her enact social justice teaching goals. Nicole's teacher education program was the catalyst that led to her to teach in urban schools, and additional education could advance her social justice understandings. These cases underscore the potential of teacher education programs to help candidates acquire the social justice principles needed for excellent work in all schools and classrooms.

Finally, the school environment affected teachers' authority and their ability to enact social justice practices. The presence of scripted curricula and standardized testing limited the degree to which Nicole and Tara could draw from students' knowledge to inform their teaching. Tara was able to find some instructional spaces to draw from student knowledge and make students' voices count in the official curriculum. She found it difficult, however, to work in a system that discounted her professional knowledge and she therefore decided to leave. The unfortunate result is that the students in her school will not have access to the excellence she brought to her classroom and her absence will create an opening that a less experienced teacher will likely fill. Had she been in a school where her insights were valued and her positive results recognized, she might have continued to teach.

Findings from all three cases can guide teacher education and professional development programs. They suggest a need to develop teachers' understandings of the social, economic, and cultural factors that both undermine and support families in high poverty communities. For teachers like Nicole, it is important to understand why some caregivers work the night shift, why some children come to school hungry, and why some parents fail to come to meetings organized by the teacher. Recognizing the range of factors that underlie these events is necessary for

challenging assumptions and creating a supportive school climate for families. In addition, Tara's case illustrates how forming trusting relationships with caregivers can be a conduit to recognizing the varieties of cultural capital that lie beyond school (Yosso 2005). By acknowledging these cultural assets, teachers are more likely to draw from them to inform their instruction and maximize student support. Nicole's case also suggests the need to help teachers understand the culturally situated nature of language, literacy, and knowledge acquisition so they can avoid judging students and caregivers according to mainstream discourse patterns (Street 1995).

Teacher education programs must go beyond challenging assumptions, however. The successes of Leslie and Tara suggest that teacher education programs must focus on helping teachers find instructional spaces where student knowledge counts in the official curriculum. Given the prescriptive nature of teaching, it becomes necessary to explicitly demonstrate teaching in the third space (Gutiérrez 2008) based on the materials made available to teachers. Such instruction should be guided by questions such as: How can we find spaces in the curriculum where students' conceptual knowledge can be used to access school-valued concepts? How can we transform the curriculum so that students' voices and literacies count as official school knowledge? Leslie's case is especially important in guiding teacher education practice in the area of critical pedagogy. Programs need to be invested in showing teacher candidates how to facilitate discussions about social and educational inequalities and how to design curricula around student activism. Addressing these concepts in teacher education will help produce teachers who embrace a social justice orientation to education and who can enact the practices associated with it.

Conclusions

This study identified differences between Nicole, Leslie, and Tara, three teachers who indicated strong commitments to urban teaching. Their dispositions, understandings, and skills varied by degrees relative to a social justice orientation to education (Cochran-Smith 2010). The findings of this study inform the design of teacher education programs to include explicit attention to the sociology of high poverty communities, the culturally situated nature of literacy and language acquisition, culturally sustaining practice based on students' funds of knowledge and community wealth concepts, and critical ways of teaching. Emphasizing these components across all teacher education programs would provide greater assurance that new and inexperienced teachers who are often hired in high poverty districts possess at least rudimentary social justice orientations.

Strong teacher education programs focused around specific social justice goals complement efforts to diversify the teaching force by recruiting and hiring teachers who show a strong capacity to be effective in underserved communities. Selecting "effective" teachers based on characteristics such as age, race, or a particular set of dispositions does not account for the conditions within schools that make it difficult for exceptional teachers like Tara to remain. Also, such a selection process may

overlook teachers like Nicole who could become highly effective with ongoing professional development that is focused on social justice principles. This research underscores the need to emphasize teacher development in the first few critical years of professional practice.

Finally, evaluating teacher practice and teacher education programs through the prism of social justice theory is helpful in identifying ways to support teacher growth toward this goal. Yet findings from this study are limited in that they are based on teachers who have demonstrated at least some commitments to social justice. Teacher education programs need to be informed by understanding a fuller spectrum of teacher development based on the narratives of teachers who may not yet espouse social justice goals to those who consistently uphold these goals in particular school contexts. Identifying key transitions in the developmental process could better inform the development of teacher education/professional development programs around the particular needs of teachers and the specific constraints of schools.

Appendix

See Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 Sample chart A: Primary and secondary codes

Primary categories (7)	Secondary codes (90)
Identity	Identifies as "teacher," teacher as ally, caregiver, change agent, learner, self-critical, "be yourself," wants to make an impact (8)
Background	Family, community, elementary school/high school, college, out-of-school (5)
Understandings	Students, caregivers, poverty, teacher education, teaching, school district, race, inequalities, recognizes privilege, students' conceptual needs, students' varied literacy abilities, students' hopelessness, challenges of urban teaching (13)
Descriptions	Students, school, community (3)
Supports	Administrative, teacher education program, college/TFA, elementary/high school, influential books, parental upbringing, professional development, school climate (8)
Beliefs	Students' talents, teacher advocacy, individualized instruction, the power of teaching, goal setting, student ownership, students' potential, transparency, flexibility, resourcefulness, sensitivity, social justice, critical of stereotypes, critical consciousness, learning, accountability, validate students' identity (17)
Practices	Address race, assessment, building trust, care for students, provide library, discuss codes of power, focus on content, question social order, culturally relevant (24 sub-codes), explain why, be explicit, focus on reading volume, develop relationships, help students see how literacy is learned, help students see their potential, high expectations, focus on higher order literacy, independence, give inspiration to learn, make visible academic literacies, focus on meaning-based practices, negotiating scripted curricula, avoid ranking students, plan, provide positive environment, focus on reading volume, recognize cultural capital, reflect, establish relations with colleagues, teach students to respect books, establish consistent routines, practice social interaction skills, teach about the sociology of achievement, teaching beyond school, validate students' language, shift goals (flexibility) (36)

Table 2 Sample chart B: a comparison between Nicole, Leslie, and Tara (perceptions)

Teacher	Student capacity	Student knowledge	Caregivers	Students' literacy/language abilities
Nicole	Positive	Students lack school-valued knowledge	Care, but lacking in routines and support, "chaotic"	Views students' language negatively
Tara	Positive	Positive view of students' knowledge traditions:	Saw parents as a potential support/ partner	Views school critically: "Usually scholars get a singular view of reading and a singular set of reading skills."
Leslie	Positive	Values students' knowledge: "They enter school having been steeped in the principles of hard work, dedication, pride, loyalty, and integrity."		Values students' language. Invites students to use their language to learn

References

Au, K. H. (1980). Participation structures in a reading lesson with Hawaiian children: Analysis of a culturally appropriate instructional event. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 11*(2), 91–115.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: Sage.

Castro, A. J. (2010). Themes in the research on preservice teachers' views of cultural diversity: Implications for researching millennial preservice teachers. *Educational Researcher, 39*(3), 198–210.

Cochran-Smith, M. (2010). Toward a theory of teacher education for social justice. In M. Fullan, A. Hargreaves, D. Hopkins, & A. Lieberman (Eds.), *The international handbook of educational change* (2nd edn., pp. 445–467). New York: Springer.

Corbin, J. A., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Enterline, S., Cochran-Smith, M., Ludlow, L., & Mitescu, E. (2008). Learning to teach for social justice: Measuring changes in the beliefs of teacher candidates. *The New Educator, 4*, 1–24.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word & the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Garmon, M. A. (2005). Six key factors for changing preservice teachers' attitudes/beliefs about diversity. *Educational Studies, 38*(3), 275–286.

Gutiérrez, K. D. (2008). Developing a sociocultural literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly, 43*(2), 148–164.

Haberman, M. (2005). *Star teachers: The ideology and best practice of effective teachers of diverse children and youth in poverty*. Houston, TX: Haberman Educational Foundation.

Johnson, S., & Birkeland, S. (2003). The schools that teachers choose. *Educational Leadership, 60*(8), 20–24.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Education Research Journal, 32*(3), 465–491.

McDiarmid, G. W., & Clevenger-Bright, M. (2008). Rethinking teacher capacity. In M. Cochran-Smith (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring issues in changing contexts* (3rd ed.). Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press.

McKinney, S., Haberman, M., Stafford-Johnson, D., & Robinson, J. (2008). Developing teachers for high poverty schools. *Urban Education, 43*(1), 68–82.

Mohatt, G., & Erickson, F. (1981). Cultural differences in teaching styles in an Odawa school: A sociolinguistic approach. In H. T. Trueba, G. P. Guthrie, & K. H. Au (Eds.), *Culture and the bilingual classroom* (pp. 105–138). Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice, 31*(2), 132–141.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93–97.

Phillips, D. (1997). Telling the truth about stories. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 13*(1), 101–109.

Phillips, S. (1983). *The invisible culture: Communication in classroom and community on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation*. New York: Longman.

Sleeter, C. E. (2001). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools: Research and the overwhelming presence of whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education, 52*(2), 94–106.

Street, B. V. (1995). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity & Education, 8*(1), 69–91.

Zeichner, K. (2009). *Teacher education and the struggle for social justice*. New York: Routledge.