

ENACTING A SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK: THE 3 C'S OF URBAN TEACHER QUALITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to conceptualize a social justice leadership framework that identifies essential urban teacher qualities. This framework serves to benefit education leaders seeking teachers best suited for urban schools and urban educators seeking to improve their praxis. The study used a critical approach to analyze data collected from semi-structured interviews with 15 district and school leaders from one large, northeastern, urban district. While administrators all searched for teachers with strong content knowledge, they also sought teachers who possessed qualities for what the authors interpret as the 3 C's: (a) cultural competency, including cultural awareness, experience, and understanding; (b) communication skills bridging urban teaching and learning; and (c) commitment to serve students and the community. The implications from the 3 C's framework can serve to remind policymakers and practitioners of the teacher qualities needed to provide children in urban communities with a just and equitable education.

Keywords: social justice, leadership, teacher quality, teacher hiring

Who should define the necessary qualities of teachers best suited for an urban school? Currently, policymakers, politicians, and philanthropists influence national, state, and private initiatives designed to improve teaching and learning outcomes in urban public schools. Though at one time conversations of teacher quality were localized to teacher preparation programs and public schools (i.e. those who supplied and demanded teachers);

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more recently, teacher quality has become the focus of multiple stakeholders including federal and state agencies, nongovernmental lobbyists, and departments of education (Ravitch, 2014). This focus has resulted in the high stakes accountability policies of the “new professionalism” (Brantlinger & Smith, 2013), such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate, that now shape the definition of teacher quality through the establishment of stricter certification requirements for teacher preparation and licensure (Roellke & Rice, 2008).

New professionalism policies relying upon “technicist” metrics, such as progress monitoring and assessment, limit teachers’ autonomy to make context-specific decisions based upon the unique dynamics of the classroom (Zeichner, 2010). An overemphasis upon such metrics may inhibit educators from developing other teacher qualities, such as their dispositional traits. One example is the exclusion of the social justice component in the Council for the Accreditation of Educators Preparation (CAEP) nomenclature when NCATE (National Council of Teacher Education) and TEAC (Teacher Education Accreditation Council) merged to form one teacher accreditation body (Wasley, 2006). The removal of this language, as a policy decision, may influence the scope and content of teacher preparation programs, resulting in a move away from courses that speak to the societal responsibilities of schools, the nonacademic roles of teachers, and the historical marginalization of students of color.

Conceptual Framework

Teaching and learning depends upon strong school leadership. To develop schools that produce equitable teaching and learning opportunities, many authors note the importance of school leaders’ beliefs, experiences, and attitudes toward social justice (Brown, 2004; Theoharis, 2007), particularly with regard to teacher quality equity (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2010). Teacher quality inequity refers to the current inequitable distribution of quality teachers, where underserved urban districts have less access to teachers who are qualified (Haberman, 2005; Ingersoll, 2001; Lankford, Loeb, & Wycoff, 2002), particularly in hard-to-staff subjects like mathematics and science (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; Liu, Rosenstein, Swan, & Khalil, 2008). For urban districts, this unequal distribution of teachers has led to research on the teacher staffing challenge, which is characterized by the challenges urban districts experience and cope with as they deal with multiple factors of low supply and high demand. However, few studies describe how urban district leaders strategize to address such challenges (Liu et al., 2009); and fewer address principals’ perceptions of teacher quality (Ingle, Rutledge, Bishop, 2011). This study was developed to address the gap in the literature by connecting social justice leadership with urban teacher quality, as district and school leaders “enact justice” to cultivate the necessary human capital needed to educate diverse student populations (Theoharis, 2007, p. 222).

Research Questions

The following questions served to examine school and district leaders’ perceptions of teacher qualities they believed were essential for serving students with a just and equitable education: “What characteristics would urban district and school leaders search

for in new teacher hires?” and “How can these findings conceptualize a framework for social justice leadership in recruiting, hiring, and developing quality urban teachers, particularly in hard-to-staff subjects like mathematics?”

Methods

This research used a case study design (Yin, 2013) of one large, northeastern, urban district with a student population of over 40,000 students – the majority of whom are students of color eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. To elicit the rich details that explain the staffing challenge, this study used qualitative interviews of district and school leaders to examine problems in recruiting and hiring new teachers, specifically science and math teachers; the challenges associated with the equitable distribution of new teachers among schools vacancies; the approaches they have taken (or plan to take) to solve these challenges; and the results from the implementation of these approaches (if any). The semi-structured interview protocol was derived from an earlier study by Liu et al. (2008), and adapted to reflect the national economic decline of the 2009 Great Recession, which impacted many labor markets including several district-wide reductions-in-force (RIFs).

An invitation to participate in the study was sent to the directors of human resources, the union leader, and all public secondary school principals. All of those invited agreed to participate in the interview, except for two principals who could not schedule a mutually convenient time. The sample was limited to secondary schools, as the mathematics staffing challenge is more pronounced at that level (Liu et al., 2008).

In total, 15 district administrators were interviewed between April and May, 2011; the sample included administrators from charter schools, magnet schools, and the local comprehensive high schools. The student populations in these schools range from approximately 200 to 1800 students. To understand the patterns and themes of each organization’s experience with recruiting and hiring math teachers, data analysis involved both contextual analysis of each school and cross-school analysis across the settings. To establish in-rater reliability, each document was coded by two research assistants and then by two researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researchers first coded inductively by the various emerging patterns and themes that were first identified, and then deductively as the researcher cycled through the data set and created tables and analytic matrices to compare the approaches, challenges, strategies, and structures that affect the recruitment and hiring of teachers in the urban district (Creswell, 2009).

Findings and Interpretations

Administrators reported finding quality teachers a challenge, despite the Great Recession of 2009, and the resulting increased supply of teachers. Due to the Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) requirement of NCLB, all leaders reported candidates’ content knowledge as a sought out quality. In addition to content knowledge, school leaders pursued candidates who reflected qualities the authors interpret as the 3 C’s: (a) cultural competency including cultural awareness, experience, and understanding; (b) communication skills bridging urban teaching and learning; and (c) commitment to serve

the students and the community. Finding a dynamic candidate embodying the 3 C's in conjunction with content competency was at the heart of the hiring challenge.

Cultural Competency

A school merely reflects society, which includes multiple cultural identities and a range of connections to social power based on historical, political, and economic factors. When teachers enter a school, their cultural identities follow them; how they interact may mirror interactions occurring in today's de facto segregated society. Given this, it is vital that teachers be aware of privileges and prejudices (Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). The growing mismatch between teacher candidates' demographics and the K-12 student population means teachers must be consciously aware of the inequitable distribution of power and the plethora of prejudice and racism embedded throughout society to ensure that they are not vehicles for prejudice, classism, and racism (Haberman & Post, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Valencia, 2010).

A cultural disconnect experienced between teachers and students may result in pedagogical and philosophical obstacles that can pose a challenge to the teaching and learning in a classroom. Thus, relationship building, trust, and caring skills that are congruent with student cultural norms are key to educators' ability to effectively connect with underserved students and promote educational equity (Delpit, 1995; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Kohl, 1995). An educator's ability to look beyond the day-to-day stressors of the school to the larger structural context of segregation and historical marginalization can empower the educator to see his or her societal role in educating and inspiring students. Such a position requires informed hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

District and school leaders identified teacher candidates' awareness, experiences, and understanding of urban cultures as absolute necessities for teachers to become reflective urban practitioners. Urban areas, like suburban or rural ones, have distinct historical, political, and economic characteristics that mold school cultures (Anyon, 1997). This awareness should include an analysis, or at least an acknowledgment, of the difference between urban and non-urban areas. As these principals explained:

Principal 1: [We need teachers] who know what they're getting into in an urban environment, or at least they're cognizant that this is not [a wealthy suburb].

Principal 2: You [can]'t live in a vacuum, you have to know what you're up against when you going into [an urban district].

As a result the majority of administrators sought candidates with either prior exposure to cultures different than their own, or experiences in urban settings. The administrators connected candidates' urban experiences and their comfort with urban children with their ability to actively engage urban students in appropriate ways.

One administrator lamented the lack of experience included in teacher preparation programs, stating, "Well, people go through those [teacher preparation] programs, come here, and they're not ready... [New hires] don't know the culture of the children, the culture of the district." These administrators spoke to the importance that teacher candidates:

[Be] able to learn, willing to learn. For us it also takes the sensitivity, for urban children in urban situations, because say what you want, urban is totally different than any place else and you have to be mindful of that.

District and school leaders emphasized that understanding the community culture needed to be asset-driven and not have deficit undertones. One described how

A lot of things that [students] have encountered in their home life has made them appear certain ways sometimes-- they may be very aggressive, they may be in many ways considered disrespectful....[but] what you have to do is understand that my kids, before you can teach them, they have to trust you, they have to think that you're real and that you care about them.

Thus, centering curricular and pedagogical goals on the interests, realities, and lives of the students increases teachers' expectation and promotes student achievement (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Gay, 2002; Watson, 2013).

Not only should educators incorporate students' culture into their pedagogical approaches, more importantly, educators should always seek potential and promise in them. Principals wanted teachers to be able to distinguish the difference between how students have been *placed* at-risk (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, Haberman, 1995) due to their surroundings, in contrast to labeling students "at-risk," and implying that teaching them is somehow risky. Making this distinction, administrators felt, will make a significant difference. For example, one principal said:

Because like a lot of urban schools there is sometimes a culture of deficit thinking which tends to be a disadvantage to the students that we serve. So to believe anything less than or to believe that anything less than success is possible by the person within themselves, that's their belief system, their value system, is not something that I, if I'm hiring somebody that's not something that would be acceptable to me. For example if I interview someone and I ask what do you think of the biggest challenges facing our students success, and you tell me it's the parents, I have a problem.

Several principals emphasized that teachers must have high expectations of their students, thereby appreciating and capitalizing on what researchers have coined as a school community's 'funds of cultural knowledge' (Koerner & Abdul-Tawwab, 2006; Seidel & Friend, 2002; Zeichner, 2010). To gain such appreciation, Zeichner (2010) recommended that teacher preparation programs expose their teacher candidates to an equitable amount of knowledge from academia, the school, *and* the community they will serve. Khalil and Griffin (2012) proposed urban field experiences as one strategy for influencing teacher candidate' preference for urban settings. Teacher candidates' exposure to school communities may offer a culturally rich teaching experience, which can better prepare candidates to approach new communities with respect and dignity in contrast to fear and xenophobia.

Communication Skills

For students to internalize concepts and form a knowledge base, a teacher must be able to communicate engagingly and responsively with all students (Braun, Willems, Brown, & Green, 1987; Ralph, Kesten, Lang, & Smith, 1998). Warren (2014), among others, described how communicating empathetically can improve culturally responsive teaching practices that are necessary for student gains in a diverse classroom setting (Dolby, 2012; Warren, 2014). Administrators repeatedly referred to the importance of a teacher's ability to deliver information. One administrator explained,

It's one thing knowing the content area, it's another thing being able to teach and being able to relate to the kids and being able to communicate with them and be able to motivate them. It's important the way the teacher talks, it's important. Their entire demeanor is important, their communication skills are very important.

Other principals discussed interpersonal skills and their importance in communicating effectively: "You need to have the personality and the skills to be able to navigate and to interact with the different kids because kids are different and that is part of the community of the school." Another principal explained, "Like would I be engaged in the classroom with this individual? It has to do with persona, it has to do with the delivery of message, it has to do with the fire in your belly."

Communication as a quality of teaching goes above and beyond process and interpersonal skills; effective communicators must be able to read social cues and use non-verbal expressions. These are often dependent upon cultural contexts (Delpit, 1995). In an urban context, this includes the ability to communicate with bilingual students, as urban areas attract many new immigrants. One principal described how multicultural his school really is:

[There are] 56 different countries from you know different continents and you know 30 something 35 or 32 different languages here. So [a teacher], is somebody I guess who's very international, I mean who understands and who's very aware and very much embraces differences of different cultures.

Administrators also spoke about the importance of being able to code-switch (Anderson, 2000), and the teacher's ability to react appropriately can be a challenge. For example, a selected number of principals stated:

Principal 1: It's knowing where the line is. It's knowing how to talk to the kids, it's knowing when you should raise your voice a little, and when you shouldn't. It's knowing when you got to be, for me a little bit of a mother at a times, and a bit of a disciplinarian.

Principal 2: They may be committed to the urban center, they just cannot adjust with the kids. Its converse is also true: you have folks in the comprehensive setting you know you send them to a school like this they wouldn't be able to function because they are so used to speaking in a certain way and these kids will give a tongue lashing if you speak to them that way, so it depends.

Just as teachers' cultural competencies may help them effectively communicate with students, their lack of intercultural communication skills may result in their frustration and lack of commitment to the profession. Urban administrators search for candidates with receptive communication skills that allow them to better understand students' worldviews and meaning making, in particular, as it affects the course of both learning and teaching in the urban school context. Communication involves more than a teacher verbally delivering information to students; connections and understandings, the byproducts of communication, rely upon educators building rapport and forming trusting relationships with students through the act of truly listening to their students. By engaging in practices that draw on the intersection of interpersonal, intrapersonal and intercultural communication (Carmack, 2014), teachers emit a sense of "cultural caring" (Gay, 2002) that promotes positive affect and well-being in the classroom, specifically, and equitable learning opportunities more generally.

Commitment to Urban Communities

In addition to a cultural knowledge base and congruent communication skills, several urban administrators identified "star" dispositions as desirable character traits in new hires (Haberman, 1995, p. 777). Specifically, administrators sought dispositions they believed embodied commitment, which many associated with both dedication and retention. To connect with students and truly impact them academically, one must be driven and motivated. Administrators explained that dedication to the school, community, and the children is the hardest aspect to vet in new hires. Further, commitment is a disposition with a meaning that varies by audience. A well-intended new hire may think that she or he is committed, but often this disposition is not fully understood until a teacher meets his or her first struggle.

Urban school commitment refers to both long-term retention (Ingersoll, 2001) and teachers' ability to act as agents of social justice who are highly dedicated to providing equitable student outcomes. Henkin and Holliman (2009) referred to this level of dedication as "affective commitment" (p. 160). Often, the daily commitment to excellence requires thorough preparation, high expectations of students, and dedication. After a three-year study of four effective teachers, Duncan-Andrade (2007) identified constant preparation, self-reflection and relentless effort as the characteristics necessary in quality teachers.

Similarly, principals in our study spoke about "teachers who have special kinds of skills, some staying power, high level of commitment, endurance." In addition, they desired teachers who were flexible, reflective and sufficiently self-aware to seek assistance in times of need to make improvements. As one administrator explained:

...When I hired physical ed[ucation] teachers, I had to have people who were going to be willing to teach phys. ed. in a building that doesn't really have a gym... Or a science teacher who's willing to work without a real science lab. You look for those kinds of qualities in a person. Dedicated.

Another administrator highlighted the importance of dedication in an urban environment by comparing the high demands of an urban school in contrast to a suburban school by stating:

You can go to any suburban district and be a teacher and be a mediocre teacher and probably do fairly well. We don't need mediocrity, we need teachers who have special kinds of skills, ability to relate to the kids...high level of commitment, endurance, content area has to be tight and have the desire to work hard and constantly improve their class. This is the difference between brain surgery and a general practitioner. You have to come in here ready to go.

Thus, in order to ensure that urban students have access to equitable opportunities, administrators believed they needed to have teachers who were highly committed to student success, and who recognized that they may be depended upon to help navigate their students towards their postsecondary aspirations. As many teachers in urban districts deal with a higher number of undesirable work conditions such as car theft, lack of parking, etc.; conditions that adversely affect career preferences for urban settings (Khalil, 2012), principals repeatedly noted that commitment to the profession is one of the most necessary qualities. Such dedication requires an understanding of the obstacles and a drive to persist beyond them.

While some administrators felt that dedication was enough, others strongly expressed a need for long-term retention and commitment to the school. One principal argued:

In education, when you're working with a population, one of the things is most important is to have consistency. ... when you have to constantly, every 2-3 years, constantly re-teach the culture to a teacher, you're spending half of your time re-teaching all over again, and all over again. They're a cycle and you never move out of the cycle to really get student achievement. So you can have wonderful teachers coming in every two years, but the culture of the school changes every two years because everyone is different. So then you never have any consistency with the teachers.

The revolving door of exiting teachers occurs more often in high needs districts (Ingersoll, 2001). This, urban leaders explain, requires more time and more resources to develop and support the teacher. Thus, commitment requires teachers to perceive their teaching positions as careers and not brief service opportunities. One administrator elaborated:

You have to really groom them and find people who are really dedicated and committed to the profession. And there's not a lot of people that are like that, especially given the instability of the profession, and the dangers associated with it. All the work and the hardship that's associated with it.

In sum, leaders sought both dedication and retention to justly serve the students in their urban schools. Teacher commitment, as a quality, allows leaders to not only build a school culture, but a professional community of practice capable of serving both the needs of teaching and learning.

Discussion - Toward a Framework of Social Justice Leadership for Urban Teacher Quality

Three primary characteristics emerged in the iterative data analysis process: cultural competency, communication skills, and commitment. Through the analysis of their experience, it is clear that central office administrators' and principals' efforts were aimed to create equitable opportunities for their underserved students by hiring teachers that embodied these characteristics. Furthermore, these characteristics are consistent with kinds of dispositions and skills that the literature identifies as essential for teachers to be effective in educating students in urban communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Gay, 2002; Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Warren, 2014). Figure 1 below represents a framework for understanding how these 3 C's are related and support one another around the core quality—content knowledge.

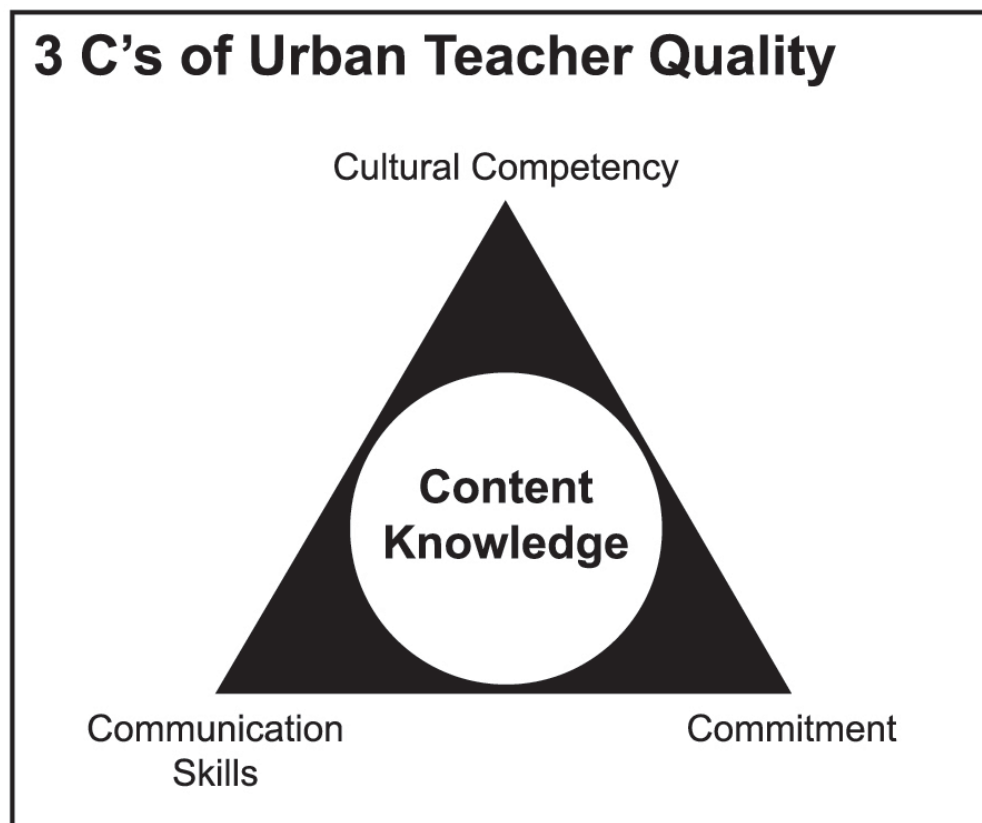


Figure 1. The social justice leadership framework for the 3 C's of urban teacher quality.

While content knowledge remains a central component of the highly qualified teacher mandate of NCLB, the social justice leadership framework for the 3 C's of urban teacher quality can serve to extend this mandate as a paradigm that reinforces the need for

other qualities administrators can strive for as they develop, recruit, hire, and retain their teacher workforce. The 3 C's requires exposure and opportunities for pre- and in-service teachers to communicate with community stakeholders in an effort to further develop the cultural awareness necessary for commitment. Similarly, a teacher's cultural awareness supports his or her ability to communicate with students. Interwoven and interdependent, each C informs and supports the other two. Communication skills that are congruent with student cultural norms are key to educators' ability to effectively connect with and gain trust of students. A lack of intercultural communication skills may result in teacher frustration and burnout, leading to a lack of commitment. Commitment results from teachers' understanding of students' lives, the community where they live, and requires an appreciation of the community's cultural funds of knowledge. The 3 C's paradigm promotes the interrelationship between each "C" with content knowledge such that educational equity and social justice become the educator's aim.

At the teacher preparation level, programs need to renew their dedication to the social justice paradigm to promote the 3 Cs. This can be achieved by required coursework that includes urban field placements in model classrooms and experiences for candidates to be involved with, not only teachers, but students, families and communities. Through these exposures and strategic learning opportunities, candidates would receive the preparation to communicate affectively and effectively with stakeholders, develop culturally responsive pedagogies, and experience the types of commitment required of highly successful teachers. However, teacher candidates cannot merely learn these practices and dispositions, but must embed them into their teaching practice to ensure that by the time they become in-service teachers these qualities are routine to their practice. To communicate effectively and justly, a teacher must understand the cultural context and strategize how to remain committed. Similarly, developing culturally responsive lessons requires listening to the interests and needs of the students. Effective communication tools will enhance a teacher's ability to align pedagogy, content, and methods to students' prior content knowledge, cultural funds of knowledge, and interests.

At the district level, an administrator dedicated to the 3 C's framework may rely upon the Framework for not just hiring, but also in the diagnosis, development, and self-reflections of the teaching staff. Just as curriculum, assessment and content knowledge evolves, a teacher's 3 C's must not stay static. Throughout the career of a teacher each of the 3 C's develops and changes. In some cases the development in one C could result in the decline in another due to the focus upon one area. For example, a focused and committed teacher may lose sight of the communication skills required for building trust and rapport with students. Or tackling cultural issues in the classroom may result in continued struggles with students or colleagues resulting in a commitment decline.

While cultural awareness and communication both involve knowledge and skills, commitment is a disposition. Dispositions may be challenging to develop, because they are essentially a component of a teacher's personality. Thereby it may be difficult for an administrator to convey to a teacher that his or her commitment is not in tandem with his/her students' needs. Cultural awareness and communication can also be difficult to develop in teachers who are resistant to change. Such development requires a safe space and should not be approached in an evaluation context, but rather through reflective and trusting professional developments.

The paradigm of the 3 C's has implications for how school and district leaders involved in recruiting, hiring, developing, and retaining teachers can search for qualities that address the current unequal distribution of quality teachers. If school and district leaders actively attract and hire urban teachers with the 3 C's, and continue to design professional development within the 3 C's social justice paradigm, urban districts as an organizational whole will improve and stand a greater chance of addressing the academic and emotional needs of their students.

In sum, the 3 C's paradigm re-introduces qualities that have become largely absent from the recent national conversation due to the rise and abundance in new professionalism metrics. The 3 C's Social Justice Leadership Framework, as a paradigm, can be used by urban education leaders seeking to hire and develop teachers, and by education preparation programs seeking to better prepare in-service candidates who can provide urban students with a fair and equitable opportunity to learn.

Limitations

The conclusions of this case study are constrained by limitations that must be acknowledged. The data are dependent on perceptions of a single district's administrators. Given the limited sample, it cannot be assumed that these findings are generalizable to all urban districts. In addition, the constructs from the conceptual framework guided analysis, but did not reflect precisely what the interview protocol sought. Finally, the study relied on the capacity and willingness of district and school administrators to accurately recall and describe events. Recall bias or limited memory may have influenced the results.

Conclusions and Implications

As a qualitative study informing the authors' theoretical interpretation of the 3 C's, this study is reflective of practices school district leaders may espouse as they face the challenges implicit to recruiting and hiring high quality urban teachers. Today more than ever, these findings have timely implications for policies within schools of education, school districts, and at the national level. Beyond basic requirements that NCLB (2001) established in requiring HQTs, urban districts have realized that recruitment of teachers for urban classrooms also require the 3 C's.

To provide equitable teaching and learning opportunities, school leaders must apply the 3 C's to lead for social justice. Similarly, to bridge the gap between teacher preparation and the needs and demands of urban schools, the teacher preparation pipeline must provide ample opportunities to identify, discuss, evaluate, and reflect upon the 3 C's dispositions and skills. Further, while there are current policy efforts to propose evaluation criteria of teacher quality, the 3 C's framework strongly urges stakeholders to move beyond mere new professionalism metrics toward social justice criteria of cultural competency, communication skills, and commitment. District leaders should augment schools of education efforts by providing professional development to new school and district leaders for more coherent cultivation of urban teacher quality.

At the national level, a renewed commitment to social justice principles must be implicit to the goal to educate all students. This commitment must look beyond evaluating teachers and scrutinizing test scores. While accountability in education is a necessity to

ensure that all students have access to opportunities for academic growth and development, accountability must not be limited to just mere quantifiable indicators of the new professionalism movement. Social justice demands that policies extend beyond accountability metrics toward competencies that systemically and equitably meet the cultural, social, emotional, and linguistic needs of diverse communities.

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