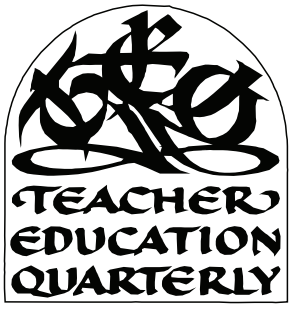


# The Foundations of Critical Teaching

## Exploring Practicing Teachers' Social Justice Knowledges

**Ashley S. Boyd, Jeanne Dyches, & Ángel Bonilla**

## Abstract

This research sought to examine the various types of social justice knowledge that 10 practicing teachers possessed and how this knowledge can be categorized and further nuanced. Drawing from the theoretical framework of social justice pedagogical and content knowledge, researchers inductively and deductively coded a corpus of interviews to analyze participants' understandings of discourse, theory, history, and agency. Findings include the prevalence of an awareness of social inequity, a viewpoint that knowledge is socially constructed, an avowal of the existence of counternarratives to oppose dominant viewpoints, and a propensity for critical reflection. Knowledge of discourses, particularly in reference to both language and action, were less present in the data, while references to social responsibility were infrequent. Implications include more attention to the social justice knowledge base in teacher education, including the aspects of collective action and the common good.

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## Introduction

Teachers who work for social justice in their classrooms represent a variety of identities and dispositions. Some teachers have noted that their personal experiences, coming from marginalized communities and having endured oppression in schools, led them to act for equity and advocate for students with similar sociocultural backgrounds (Kohli, 2009). Other teachers attribute their critical approaches and commitment to addressing social injustices to their backgrounds, perhaps having been raised by families committed to activism and taught to work for a better society (Boyd, 2017). Still other teachers credit their teacher preparation programs, citing the equity orientation of teacher educators that inspired them to address injustices in their schools and classrooms (Y. A. Lee, 2011). While much research has explored factors that influence teachers' social justice dispositions, less scholarship has explicitly examined teachers' foundational *knowledges*—understandings about society and its power-laden structures and stratifications. Here we ask, What do teachers who work specifically for social justice know, and how can this knowledge be categorized and nuanced?

Elsewhere we have posited social justice knowledges in theoretical terms (Dyches & Boyd, 2017). Yet, as Mills and Ballantyne (2016) noted, "a great deal of published work in the area of teacher education and social justice presents reflections on and/or suggestions for practice, rather than empirical research" (p. 263). In this article, we draw on empirical evidence to advance and complicate the theory of social justice knowledge (SJK), to define and expand upon the understandings that teachers possess in depth, and to examine which elements of social justice knowledge are pervasive among data from a body of practicing teachers and which are more latent.

In what follows, we survey the literature on teachers' knowledges related to teaching for social justice. We theoretically situate our work within the social justice pedagogical and content knowledge (SJPACK; Dyches & Boyd, 2017) framework, which this research empirically investigates, focusing on one domain of the paradigm, SJK. Next, we describe the multiple case study we undertook to explore the work of 10 practicing teachers who all self-identified as social justice oriented, and we elucidate our layers of coding of interview transcripts. We then offer a series of findings, noting the knowledges that were more and less pervasive in the work of these teachers. Finally, we conclude with implications for practice and a call for further research to continue to examine the types of knowledges that fund social justice teaching.

## Review of the Literature: Knowledges That Fund Equity-Based Teaching

In surveying the literature related to the knowledges that guide social justice teaching, we found scholarship on both preservice teachers (PSTs) and in-service teachers (ISTs) to be valuable and relevant to our purposes. Research in teacher

education represents the types of knowledge experts deem necessary and communicate through their coursework and assignments, whereas studies on ISTs show us the knowledges that current teachers practice and possess. Thus we synthesized and categorized both bodies of scholarship.

### *Knowledge of Self*

Teacher educators and researchers committed to social justice have established that a key prerequisite for social justice teaching is an awareness of one's sociocultural identity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). Often grounded in the fact that much of the teaching force is White, middle class, and female (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019), teachers must understand themselves as cultural beings and dissect their own socializations (Cook & Dyches Bissonnette, 2016). Goodwin and Darity (2019) emphasized the importance of self-reflection for educators, especially because they bring their "beliefs, attitudes, and personal theories to the learning-to-teach process, no matter positive/negative, culturally competent/racist, asset/deficit-focused, nationalist/pluralist," and therefore must "consciously engage . . . in reflection and examination of their autobiographies . . . to surface problematic preconceptions" (p. 66). For social justice teaching, then, the goal of reflection and solidifying knowledge of the self is to translate knowledge into practice.

In many instances, such reflection involves a recognition of privilege (Boyd, 2017). Often, people from dominant groups fail to see their advantages or learn to justify their advantages through internalizing socialized narratives, such as the myth of meritocracy (Applebaum, 2010). A variety of methods, such as autobiographical or autoethnographic writing (Boyd & Noblit, 2015; Vavrus, 2009) and the creation of art (Gay, 2010), have been successful in helping PSTs achieve such self-awareness and to begin to understand the "normality of Whiteness" (Cabrera, 2018). Hackman (2005) included self-reflection in her five components for social justice education, writing, "Ongoing self-reflection allows dominant group members to begin to extricate themselves from the trappings of this invisible privilege and work to be more effective agents of change in their classrooms and communities" (p. 107). Teacher educators have documented how this process can be an emotional one, leading to guilt, discomfort, and even emotional paralysis (Bettez, 2011; DiAngelo, 2018). Matias (2016) reminded us that discussions of race are often tied to "a seemingly invisible state of emotionality" (p. 2) and intricately connected to systems of power. To work for socially just futures, teachers must commit to untangling these systems.

Other scholars (Brown, 2014; Kohli, 2014) emphasized the importance of reflection for *all* teachers, including teachers of Color. Sams and Dyches (2017) explained *critical* reflection as

> a process that depends first on teachers' [*sic*] examining their own sociocultural identities, privilege, and bias—a basic but foundational opening—and then applying

> this understanding of self to teaching practice so they may create more equitable, socially just conditions for culturally and linguistically diverse students. (p. 76)

Behizadeh et al. (2017) introduced collaborative spaces, which they call "Critical Friendship Groups," for critical reflection among a diverse team of PSTs. In their work, participants shared dilemmas of practice and engaged with one another by posing reflective questions surrounding their difficulties from the classroom. Individuals followed with written reflective summaries after group meetings. Researchers found that the experience allowed PSTs "to push each other to think critically about themselves, their schools, and the educational system writ large, and subsequently reframe deficit views of students as well as other dilemmas that misidentified the source of the issue" (p. 294). Thus colleagues' influences can galvanize critical self-reflection.

### *Knowledge of Students*

Once teachers recognize themselves as cultural beings, they can better discern students' perspectives, backgrounds, and funds of knowledge. Ladson-Billings (1995) documented the many benefits of bringing in "students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (p. 161), and other scholars continue to expand on her pivotal work to advocate for knowing the "languages and literacies and other cultural practices of students and communities to ensure the valuing and maintenance of our increasingly multiethnic and multilingual society" (Paris, 2012, p. 94). Such an awareness undergirds teaching that is asset based and bridges students' home cultures and the school environment.

Examples abound of teachers who have used their knowledge of students to engage, empower, and excite them (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). T. S. Lee and McCarty (2017) described research conducted at Native American Community Academy, where teachers built from the insights of the local communities who sent their students to the school and used "assessment practices that reflect a holistic view of student performance" (p. 67). In other instances, Ruday (2019) incorporated the types of texts in which students of diverse ethnic backgrounds were interested and which they frequently encountered to teach about writing strategies and promote their success, and Ensign (2005) conceptualized culturally responsive mathematics education by, in part, using students' home cultures in lessons. These studies reported higher levels of student performance and engagement and implied a knowledge of students as consequential to the teaching approach.

To help PSTs develop a knowledge of students, many teacher education programs incorporate a community-oriented component in which PSTs work with youths outside the classroom in "settings that revealed the talents of students from non-mainstream groups in ways schools customarily do not" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015, p. 115). This might involve tutoring in after-school programs or volunteering at a community agency (e.g., Conner, 2010), opportunities that allow PSTs

to recognize the myriad qualities that students possess and upon which the PSTs could draw in curriculum. Rather than treating students as empty vessels to be filled (Freire, 1970), social justice educators learn about students' existing literacies and channel those to expand their teaching and learning.

### *Knowledge of Society*

Beyond the self and students, the literature related to teachers' SJKs also includes an awareness of society—particularly of the ways that society structures and reproduces inequity. While a recognition of social inequity is often included in the goals of critical multicultural education courses in teacher education programs, diversity classes have traditionally been "add-ons" or isolated entities (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Few studies (e.g., Whipp, 2013) have been able to determine the impact of such courses, especially in the long term. And yet, discerning the existence of systems of oppression and unpacking the ways that they exist or are built into the fabric of our everyday lives are necessary to disrupt those systems in schools. Goodwin and Darity (2019) cited such awareness as "contextual knowledge," or the understanding that "contexts are situated within larger political, historical, institutional, and cultural contexts" (p. 67). They also included "sociological knowledge," or being "cognizant of the ways in which schools have historically replicated social stratifications and inequities by grooming students for future life roles as predetermined by their class and race" (p. 67). Both forms involve seeing society as a mechanism or force that has considerable power over the opportunities and outcomes of a person's life.

Studies that examine teachers' knowledge of society often connected to students and schools. Muller and Boutte (2019) described their work to help educators understand systems by using Freire's (1970) dimensions of oppression to examine individual, institutional, and cultural/societal oppression. They utilize standardized tests as an analogy because teachers can relate to "feeling disempowered" in that realm and thus could "extrapolate the process by which the loss of their power occurs . . . to understand how institutional oppression works" (p. 1).

Further studying teachers' knowledge of society, McDonald (2005) conducted case studies of 10 PSTs to determine their learning about social justice in their teacher education program. Utilizing Young's (1990) framework for social justice, she coded based on "concepts of justice as attending to the needs of individual learners, justice as focusing on social relationships, and a view of individuals as tied to broader social groups" (p. 424). In her dimensions for learning, she included an institutional component, categorized by participants' "recognition that oppression is a result of institutional constraints" (p. 427). Thus she examined the educator's ability to connect to systems but did not specifically examine their knowledge of those systems. Similarly, Chubbuck (2010) argued that teachers' knowledges should include combined attention to individual students and to the structural inequities

that affect those students to "diminish the danger of a deficit view and open up a wider range of possible solutions for improving students' learning and life opportunities" (p. 201). Thus not only should educators be aware of the personalized factors that might influence students (such as their learning needs or home lives) but they should also note factors that affect students' success outside that narrow scope. And, even beyond discerning these inequities in the schooling milieu, such as those built into standardized testing or disparities in school funding, she argues that such an orientation could lead teachers also to perceive "inequitable structures in society, frequently linked to race, class, and gender, such as differential access to employment, housing, transportation, and health care" (p. 201). Chubbuck hinted at teachers' knowledge of systems but did not study those in detail.

The SJPACK model, and especially the SJK component, connects to this aspect of perceiving social institutions and reproduction. In this study, we explore that aspect in depth, examining teachers' specific perspectives on institutions and how they conceptualize them. Chubbuck (2010) noted that her framework on teacher knowledge for social justice is theoretical and not rooted in systemized study, and we attempt to fill that gap through our empirical work with practicing teachers. Furthermore, in Goodwin and Darity's (2019) content analysis of the literature on teacher education that focuses on social justice education, they found that personal knowledge was most outstanding, while there was "minimal attention paid to sociological knowledge" (p. 72). Our study also addresses that dearth in the literature by offering and exploring what comprises SJK and how it manifests in teachers' descriptions of their worlds and their work. Finally, this body of literature on teachers' SJKs conceptualizes such understandings solely within the scope of teaching; we break from this to examine the general knowledges that teachers possess that are social justice oriented. Although, again, these knowledges inform their teaching and are represented in our data, we also show the broader scope of beliefs and theories they hold.

## Theoretical Framework: Social Justice Pedagogical and Content Knowledge

This study draws from the SJPACK theoretical framework (Dyches & Boyd, 2017), a paradigm that distills educators' unique knowledges and approaches to teaching when working for disciplinary-specific social justice. The model builds on the groundbreaking work of Shulman (1986, 1987) and his theory of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which named and described what teachers must possess to translate their knowledge for student comprehension. Such knowledge and skills had up to that point been nebulous entities, and Shulman (1986) changed the landscape of the field by outlining the differences in content and pedagogy and how those two merged in the practice of successful educators who anticipated what students needed and adapted their strategies accordingly.

What PCK did not account for, however, were issues of equity and diversity as

foundational for teaching. SJPACK avows a broad base for knowledge of pedagogy and content that are infused with a critical focus, a valuing of diversity, and actions to address oppression. The model consists of three domains: SJK, social justice content knowledge, and social justice pedagogical knowledge.

In this article, we focus on the base of the paradigm, SJK, which informs the remaining two domains. Building on the reviewed literature, we named several types of knowledges that critically oriented teachers should possess related broadly to society and institutions. While these likely inform their teaching, they are not necessarily directly linked; rather, they are indicative of a worldview. One may, for example, know that the Indigenous peoples of this country suffered a genocide without that being connected to one's teaching. The knowledge may later inform a pedagogical approach or a selection of a text, but at its base level, it is simply knowledge of a historical era.

SJK therefore includes an understanding of how systems of oppression, privilege, and domination operate. Such knowledge involves an awareness of how everyday activities serve to perpetuate hegemony and reproduce racism, classism, sexism, heteronormativity, xenophobia, and ableism. We further delineated the domain of SJK into accompanying categories and strands. First, SJK involves both possessing an understanding of *Discourses* as "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 2014, p. 3) and recognizing that the social position, language, and behavior of a person are ideologically laden and thus reflect the person's orientation to equity. Within this aspect of Discourses, therefore, seeing how *language* reflects bias (e.g., the question "where are you from?" to imply that a person appears non-U.S. born) or is used to construct myths (e.g., the myth of meritocracy) are examples of this type of knowledge. Discerning how people are complicit in everyday oppression through their *actions* (e.g., staying silent when observing an injustice), both intentional and unknown, is also indicative of this sort of awareness.

SJK also includes familiarity with *theory*, or a variety of perspectives that can be mapped onto society to render transparent the ways inequity is reproduced (e.g., critical race theory, disability studies theory). Dyches and Boyd (2017) noted,

> These theories elucidate the ways in which authority is laced endemically into the fabric of society; how, for example, the gender binary is so pervasive that we do not question the existence of women's and men's sections in clothing stores or how we take for granted the normalization of accessible spaces for the able bodied. (p. 68)

And, while they do not imply that SJK requires that teachers know all critical theories, they do purport that SJK at the theoretical level denotes some awareness of the ability of theory to help individuals see and explain social inequity. The theory category includes the strand *epistemological stance*, which sees knowledge as a social construct rather than as neutral or objective. Such a perspective allows one to recognize that knowledge is always contextual and to value knowledges from nontraditional spaces.

The third category of SJK, *history*, references an understanding that histories shared by marginalized individuals may differ from those commonly accepted as objectified "truth" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This knowledge represents the awareness of the existence of the *dominant narrative*, which is often found in textbooks or commonly shared among those with power, as well as extant *counternarratives*, those stories that disrupt or tell a different story than the prevailing.

Finally, if SJK is to translate to social justice practice, a fourth category, *agency*, is required. Teachers exhibit agency "by the work they do in their classrooms—through the way they treat content and the pedagogies they use" (Dyches & Boyd, 2017, p. 483)—but they can also participate in educational activism outside of the classroom, such as through protests or group efforts for reform. Encompassed within agency is *reflection*, as teachers' awareness of their positionalities and sociocultural backgrounds is essential knowledge for working for social justice, as is *social responsibility*, the understanding that we have an obligation to ensure the humanity, safety, and rights of all individuals. Even when it may not benefit them directly, a person who acts in light of social responsibility sees how we are all connected and seeks to move from being an ally to being a co-conspirator (Love, 2019), leveraging their privilege and taking risks to support those who are marginalized in society.

## Data Sources and Methods

We turned to the SJPACK model, particularly the SJK domain, categories, and strands, to label and analyze the knowledges of 10 English language arts (ELA) and social studies/history teachers who self-identified as social justice–oriented educators, meaning they expressed an understanding of the existence of social inequity and a commitment to addressing injustices in their classrooms. *Injustice* denotes the mistreatment of individuals or groups based on, for example, historically cemented racism, sexism, or ableism. We used purposive sampling to recruit each teacher, calling on those in our teaching networks who we knew maintained these commitments through our own conversations or observations of them or by their community reputation. The teachers' foci were broad ranging: Each teacher's commitment to social justice manifested differently (Boyd, 2017). Some teachers concentrated on incorporating curriculum about a local tribe into their classrooms as a way to advance equity, while others worked toward a more inclusive curriculum and facilitated their students' critical literacies surrounding the traditional literature canon (Dyches, 2018). Regardless, their common propensity for addressing marginalization and engaging with lesser publicized narratives situated them as equity minded and thereby as participants in the study. Representative of the larger teaching population (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019), six identified as White, heterosexual, cisgender women, and three participants identified as White, heterosexual, cisgender men. One participant identified as a Japanese American, heterosexual, cisgender man. Teachers held middle or sec-

ondary school positions and were located in the Midwest or Northwest region of the United States (see Table 1).

This study comes from a larger body of data on research on social justice educators. In the broader study, we collected field notes from classroom observations and documents, including lesson plans and student work. In addition, we conducted individual semistructured interviews, ranging from 1 to 4 hours. Primarily, analysis and findings relied on interview data, as this data set allowed us to understand how teachers self-described and framed their SJKs. Our interview protocols included questions such as, How do you define "social justice education"? What is most important to you in your teaching? How do you determine what texts and lessons to use with your students? We focused our analysis on two questions: What do teachers who work specifically for social justice know, and how can this knowledge be categorized and nuanced?

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Members of the research team, two of whom identify as White women and teacher educators and the other a Latino man and doctoral student (all cisgender), independently coded data line by line. Initially, a layer of descriptive coding was conducted on all interview data, which noted topics, texts, references, and ideas that arose (Saldaña, 2012). Next, a set of deductive codes was constructed from the SJK domain of the SJPACK framework (e.g., Discourses, theory) with which to return to the data. This layer of deductive codes (Gilgun, 2011) was then applied to the data and the initial codes with careful attention to any outliers. The research team coded one transcript with the deductive codes in weekly iterations and met to discuss the data and codes, honing our understanding of each code and further defining it to establish interrater reliability. All committed to social justice education, we drew on our knowledge of the field as well as our own positionalities to constantly question our understandings and ensure common identifications of codes. We coded each subsequent transcript, discussing any discrepancies in coding and reaching agreement to guide the next round of coding.

As the deductive codes were applied, antithetical occurrences were also noted to account for negative instances and to maintain the integrity of the study. Memo writing (Charmaz, 2006) was used to keep a record of such instances. Once the material was saturated with the deductive set and any antithetical codes for each case, we created code reports that noted occurrences for each code and subcode across cases. Those aspects most frequently coded were then analyzed inductively to determine how each attribute of SJK appeared—what sorts of knowledges arose from the interviews and how the participants described the categories and strands. This allowed for us to analyze across cases for general themes but also to see nuance in the ways the types of SJK teachers exhibited (see Table 2 for examples of coding).

**Table 1**
***Participant Demographic and School Information***

| *Teacher name* | *Subject/ school* | *Identifiers* | *Teaching context* | *School population* | *Student demographics* | *Free and reduced-price meal (%)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ansleigh | ELA/ Barry HS | White, White, straight, cisgender woman | suburban Midwest | 1,771 | 2016–2017: 83.7% White; 5.1% Asian; 4.3% Hispanic; 3.4% Black; 3.3% two or more races; 0.23% American Indian/ Alaska Native; 0.05% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander | 14.7 |
| Kate | ELA/ Barry HS | White, straight, cisgender woman | suburban Midwest | 1,771 | 2016–2017: 83.7% White; 5.1% Asian; 4.3% Hispanic ; 3.4% Black; 3.3% two or more races; 0.23% America Indian/ Alaska Native; 0.05% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander | 14.7 |
| Catherine | ELA/ Spruce HS | White, straight, cisgender woman | urban Midwest | 1,984 | 2016–2017: 72% White; 7.5% Asian; 10.4% Hispanic ; 6.3% Black; 3.6% two or more races; 0.3% America Indian/Alaska Native; 0.05% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 25.3 |
| Cooper | ELA/ Spruce HS | White, straight, cisgender man | urban Midwest | 2,000 | 4% White; 10% Hispanic; 7% Asian; Black; 4% two or more races 23.0 | 23.0 |
| Heather | ELA/ Hope Valley HS | White, straight, cisgender woman | suburban Northwest | 2,103 | 76.6% White; 12.1%; Hispanic; 5.1% Asian; 2.9% Black; 0.9% American Indian | 22.1 |
| Henry | ELA/ Spruce HS | White, straight, cisgender man | urban Midwest | 2,000 | 74% White; 10% Hispanic; 7% Asian; 5% Black; 4% two or more races | 23.0 |
| Mr. Q | ELA/ Seaside HS | Japanese American, straight, cisgender man | suburban Northwest | 1,542 | 45% White; 36% Hispanic; 5% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander; 4% Black; 4% Asian; 4% two or more races; <1% American Indian/Alaska Native | 30.0 |
| Minnie | social studies/ Martin MS | White, straight, cisgender, woman | rural Northwest | 627 | 70.9% White; 9.1% Hispanic; 5% American Indian/Alaskan Native; 10.2% Asian; 2.1% Black; 6% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander; 6.5% two or more races | 74.0 |

—continued on next page—

## Table 1
### *Participant Demographic and School Information*
***(continued from previous page)***

| *Teacher name* | *Subject/ school* | *Identifiers* | *Teaching context* | *School population* | *Student demographics* | *Free and reduced-price meal (%)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Thomas | social studies/ Rock MS | White, straight, cisgender man | urban Northwest | 692 | 71% White; 10% Hispanic; 10% two or more races; 4% Asian; 3% Black; 1% American Indian/ Alaska Native; 1% Hawaiian Native/ Pacific Islander | 52.5 |
| Amelia | social studies, history/ Seaside HS | White, straight, cisgender woman | suburban Northwest | 1,542 | 45% White; 36% Hispanic; 5% Hawaiian Native/ Pacific Islander; 4% Black; 4% Asian; 4% two or more races; <1% American Indian/ Alaska Native | 74.0 |

Note. ELA = English language arts. HS = high school. MS = middle school.

## Table 2
### *Illustrative Data Reflecting Deductive/Inductive Coding Processes*

| *Teacher interview data* | *Initial codes (deductive)* | *Focused codes (deductive)* | *Theoretical codes (inductive)* | *Theoretical codes (inductive)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I think things like pointing out inequality, income inequality like the way race definitely plays a role. (Mr. Q) | social justice knowledge-theory | critical theories | society | discerning social inequalities |
| As a White male, you are basically given more privilege because of your gender and ethnicity than most other people in this community. (Thomas) | social justice knowledge-theory | critical theories | society | referencing privilege and oppression |
| I think that it's about kind of identifying ahead of time, which, which stories haven't been told, especially in history. (Amelia) | social justice knowledge-history | counter-narratives | curriculum | recognizing predominant stories and seeing alternatives |
| I don't know how exactly the canon got started, in terms of who decided this is worthy and this isn't worthy and evaluating all of that. (Ansleigh) | social justice knowledge-theory | epistemological stance | curriculum | questioing the construction of accepted knowledge |
| They have that perspective and that empathy and that understanding . . . hopefully going forward. (Minnie) | social justice knowledge-agency | social responsibility | curriculum | hoping students will act for the betterment of others from their learning |

## Findings: The Prevalence and Limits of Teachers' Social Justice Knowledges

Findings reveal that participants exhibit certain SJKs almost unanimously, whereas others were rarely discussed. Because our intent was to further expand the SJK framework from theory to empirical research and to understand how the domain exists (or not) in teachers' conceptions of themselves and their work, we focus here thematically on the most to least prevalent and then use that to broaden our understanding of each. In our analysis, the most outstanding SJKs described by our 10 teacher participants were *critical theories*, *epistemological stance*, and *counternarratives*. These knowledges were in some instances separate from the individual's teaching, describing their view of how society and history operate, but at other times were also often discussed in connection with their teaching. Participants explained their instructional choices through theoretical perspectives that supported them.

## Prevalent Knowledges

### *Theory: Critical Theories*

Many teachers discussed the lenses, or theories, through which they viewed the world, reflecting their understandings of inequity and the ways it is reproduced. Analysis revealed theoretical understanding of systems of oppression such as racism, gender, and socioeconomics. For example, Thomas, a White cisgender man, discussed the advantages of being White and how race bestows power. He explained,

> For some people not to understand the sheer privilege of being male or the sheer privilege of being White, they don't understand when people say "hands up." And then you see . . . videos of kids and adults being killed with their hands up. And they're like, "Hey, we *are* complying. You're killing us anyway."

Thomas here realized that his race and gender afforded him certain entitlements in society, and he connected those with larger structures, such as the justice system and police brutality. Although Thomas did not name Whiteness or White supremacy as the critical theory from which he was drawing, he nonetheless recognized their power. In another instance, Kate, a White cisgender woman, reflected on gender and race, noting, "This has been a patriarchal society forever. Women are still fighting for, women and minorities[1] are still fighting for their voices to be acknowledged and valued within the broader context of society." Kate attributed this to "political, social, all sorts of factors," acknowledging the various forces at play in maintaining oppression.

Whereas both Kate and Thomas referred to society broadly, other teachers described their critical perspectives through references to their teaching. Catherine, a White cisgender woman, referenced her desire for her students to become more aware, sharing that while they may not have thought about it before, there is a "his-

tory here of what's happened," and that she wants to "make them aware that there are silent hands guiding their experiences and that they can have some agency." Her words express a desire to help students discern influential social forces rather than treating them as axiomatic. Her reference to the "silent hands" reflects an understanding of systematic oppression. Similarly, Mr. Q, a Japanese American cisgender man, shared that he liked to focus on topics such as

> inequality, income inequality, like the way race definitely plays a role. For example, I'm working on a unit about *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is about . . . this family in Chicago in the Southside. Basically, it's about how in that community there's been a deliberate sort of targeted effort by basically the White stakeholders to keep that community poor.

Through his references here, we see that Mr. Q recognizes the economic systems present in society that again privilege Whiteness and work to replicate disadvantage.

### *Theory: Epistemological Stance*

Alongside their reflections on critical theories, most participants referenced their belief that knowledge and curriculum are socially constructed, reflecting their epistemological stance. Comments such as Cooper's emerged multiple times in the data:

> But, of course, it's there, right, the politics of text selection for our curriculum. . . . We teach some texts because they've been taught. . . . We are lucky here [Spruce High School] in that we don't have a heavy hand from above that tells us what we're going to need to teach.

The prevalence of this code in the data reflected teachers' discernments that the material that they taught was not neutral and that the choices surrounding their curricula were often, though not always, in their hands. While this strand overlapped some with *critical theories* as a parallel code under the category of *theory*, it was unique in its being specific to the social construction of knowledge and curriculum rather than a perspective on broader social issues.

Reflecting such an awareness, Ansleigh, a White cisgender woman, noted the influence of Christianity in her discussion of knowledge. Reflecting on the English literature canon, she said,

> I think that we are slow to change, and because British literature is based on Western ideals and principles, like the whole "this is a Christian tradition," it's not just the British was a world-controlling empire that had influence and therefore these texts grew in their importance. I think it was also because most of the texts are based on Christian principles which also has influence and power. Once that became rooted into our education system based on "here's who we are as a family, as an American society; here are values, here are texts that support these values," so we have British and American literature as those cornerstones because I think we (a) identify with them and (b) it reinforces that value system that I think runs archetypally deep.

Ansleigh's comments powerfully critique "the way things are" and "why," in terms of what curriculum is present in schools. She speculated that the reason certain texts are prevalent in U.S. curricula is because they uphold the values of the religion that, even if latently, dominant individuals in this nation wanted to promote. Similarly, other teachers questioned the canon. Kate ruminated, "If it's important enough for us to read we should be asked to defend it and have to defend it and it should be something that's evolving though and changing," and she went on to ask who decides the canon and who gets to contribute to determining its composition.

In terms of their specific curriculum, Mr. Q offered an assessment of the state standards guiding his work:

> There's no mention of—I think it might be something about "diverse types of texts," but I think they are really thinking of genre, I don't think they are thinking of writers from the developing world, from all over the world. I think if you value that as a society, it should be reflected in our standards.

Amelia, a White cisgender woman, referring to her advanced placement textbooks, commented, "They're pretty traditional texts," but she went on to say that they are evolving to include "women, Native Americans . . . a lot of the questions on the exam have, you know, asked about civil rights era, women's rights, these types of things." She then noted,

> There was actually a little pushback, in the AP [Advanced Placement] world against this . . . a little more modern history instead of this traditional history that's very patriotic. There were people that didn't want a negative story told. . . . They were worried that the exam, you know, wasn't going to really reflect what they valued. . . . Even the big textbook companies are the ones that can perpetuate marginalization, ignoring histories and kind of hiding histories.

Her words highlighted her knowledge of how stories are commodified and reproduced, subjugating some groups at the expense of others, reflecting her epistemological stance. Each of these examples also demonstrates how teachers connected the notion of *value* to knowledge, reflecting that knowledge is in fact constructed based on what is esteemed, often by those with power. That teachers were so adept and quick to evaluate knowledge in this manner indicates that they are well versed in this strand of knowledge of the framework.

### *History: Dominant Narratives and Counternarratives*

In addition to the category of theory in the SJPACK model, *history* was also outstanding, as the teachers' awareness of both strands, *dominant narratives* and its complement, *counternarratives*, arose frequently in the data. Similar to the previous findings, this transpired in broad references, such as in Mr. Q's noting that there are "histories that are often ignored." He went on to elaborate, "People who are elderly, people who are developmentally disabled, people who are undocumented, but also mentally ill, incarcerated people—you know, all these people who don't

have as much voice in our society." Providing an example through "the way we incarcerate people in this country," he explained how individuals who serve their time are then stripped of their rights and abilities upon release, concluding, "You just destroy their whole economic potential, it destroys family structures. So, there's all these things that happen in our society, but if you aren't a part of those groups, you don't notice it." Mr. Q, in this response, acknowledged the dominant narrative of the justice system as well as the individual counternarratives at its peripheral.

Teachers often related explanations of counternarratives relative to their disciplines. Minnie, for example, disclosed that while the history in her northwestern state was often presented as neutral or even celebratory, it is actually quite "dark." She explained how her students reacted to learning about local tribal history and the federal government's imposition of treaties to seize land: "The students were appalled. They're like, 'That's ridiculous. This is our history?' And, I'm like, 'Yes, this is your history. It's not just 'the Natives' history.'" Catherine discussed her propensity to ask students to "reconsider something that might be familiar. Like the topic of injustice and how to see it differently using this metaphor that we are of no single stories." In essence, she was teaching her students to recognize counternarratives, as was Amelia, who considered,

> When you look at a textbook, kind of what's left out. And with my students, especially because they come from so many different backgrounds and cultures, they get really excited when we get to do lessons to kind of relate to that. So, it's like looking at your traditionally marginalized groups, identifying those groups and figuring out how I can help to tell that story a little bit.

These teachers strove to expose students to the counternarratives in their content areas, drawing first upon their own knowledge of them.

### *Agency: Reflection*

Similarly, data show that participants frequently demonstrated critical reflection as part of their social justice perspectives. Teachers shared past experiences that had made them examine their own positionalities and spurred their understandings of inequity. They were quick to critique themselves as having been naive or ignorant before pivotal events. Thomas, for example, shared of his traveling ventures, "Now when I went to the Philippines, it was nothing what like they told me. . . . All I remember was expecting this and getting something else. It was quite the culture shock." Heather critically examined her schooling socialization, sharing,

> Especially being from this side of the state, I can personally say in high school, we didn't learn anything about it [Native American history]. So, like personal experience, you don't know anything except the stereotypes, that's all you ever learn.

Engaging in reflection around his own racial privilege, Henry told the story of being pulled over by a police officer when he was 16:

> I got out of the car, and I started walking away because I was parked in front of

> my friend's house. . . . And I started walking in here. Uh, I was a White person in the . . . suburbs. It was a White cop. He didn't pull out his gun.

Comparing this encounter to what he knows exists today between police officers and young men allowed Henry to discern his own privilege.

Other participants' reflections specifically mentioned their experiences in their teacher education programs. Kate shared,

> The prior knowledge, the historical knowledge, the experiences and I had a pretty, I had some pretty good experiences and background with that in my college-level courses. It's a whole different continent. It's a whole different long, enduring set of historical, political, social, economic concerns.

Similarly, Amelia remembered a reading from her university education

> about teaching students in poverty and . . . what it was like to be in poverty and how those students bring so many different things to the table. And it was completely eye-opening to me, you know, being from, you know, pretty middle-class family.

Having been exposed to new knowledge and using this to engage in critical reflection, then, allowed these teachers to broaden their own SJK that influenced their teaching.

### *Existing Knowledges*

While findings showed a developed sense of critical theory, history, and agency through reflection, analysis also revealed fewer examples of teachers' knowledges related to discourse, language, and action. As a reminder, the SJPACK framework delineates action into a separate category from agency, where action in this case refers to seeing how practices are parts of larger Discourse (Gee, 2015) that uphold oppression, while agency refers to teachers' actions personally and professionally based on their concern with inequity. Actions replicate systems, while agency seeks to dismantle them.

### *Discourses: Language and Action*

Closely tied to theory, an awareness of *Discourses* involves seeing how privileged communities and the everyday practices within them preserve the status quo. Specifically, discerning the power of language to construct "reality" and narrate the myths and social scripts, such as meritocracy, that exist and are ideologically laden is indicative of this type of knowledge, as is seeing how language can be used to overturn those entities. Heather, for instance, referenced "the emblem for the Red Skins," which she noted "is very, very offensive," recognizing the cultural work that such a discursive feature accomplishes, serving to perpetuate stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and to disregard their voices. She also spoke of the historic use of language to propel death and destruction, such as Richard Pratt's slogan "Kill the Indian, Save the Man" as a mission for the boarding schools that stripped

Indigenous peoples of their children and their culture, and she avowed how intricately related language and culture are, reflecting her knowledge of language as a crucial component of social justice.

Henry, in a conversation on being a White ally, stated,

> Words and power matter here. And as a White male . . . when it comes down to it, my language matters. The language of everyone matters here, and the question is . . . do we want White male allies in this fight for equality? As a White male, I'd like to think yes.

Cognizant of the influence of his words, Henry realized that his position afforded him a way to use discourse for change, to disrupt the potential harm that negative language has caused. Ansleigh similarly ruminated on opening conversation as a transformative practice, sharing,

> My positioning is from an American position, so perhaps when I read Isabel Allende I think, "Wow, OK, this is something that I hadn't considered before, this is reaching from South America to America," and what that means to insert this into this and how those talk to each other. Again, maybe it's just because it breaks me out of my perspective, but I think that's what it would do for students as well.

Ansleigh's consideration brings in multiple points of view and asks how those might speak to each other, breaking down notions of "one right way" of seeing a topic. Amelia noted the discourse communities involved in schools in particular and asked,

> What is it about the classroom that has traditionally allowed teachers to be the people in control? Why is it that we have so much more power? Is it ageism? Is it because we have more education? . . . Why should we make all the decisions?

Amelia here questioned the power practices in schools, and her words contain hints to the power practices that traditionally marginalize students, especially students of Color, in those institutions.

### *Infrequently Discussed Knowledges*

The preceding findings illustrate those knowledges that were present in the data, but we found very few mentions of teachers' agency with regard to activism and social responsibility. When teachers referred to their agency, they almost always couched it in a curricular decision. For example, Minnie shared her approach using narratives to personalize Indigenous history: "And so I just came across that and I thought, 'I'm gonna do this' . . . try something and if it doesn't work I'll throw it out next year." Similarly, Heather noted, "I just decided I wanted to do it, but I had to do it right," referring to new content she integrated related to a text by an Indigenous writer and her desire to raise pertinent contemporary issues with her students. Although these are examples of teachers developing more inclusive classroom materials and thus reveal their SJK in that sense, teachers made few references to participating in actions outside their local spaces or in collective efforts.

Amelia was one exception. She described a collaborative team at her school that planned "professional development for the staff around different initiatives, district initiatives and school initiatives" and explained,

> Some things that we're working on a lot right now is forming a center for international studies. So, we're working a lot on different components that relate to social justice. I would say things like recognizing perspectives and taking action is a big component.

Amelia went on to describe various efforts that she initiated after school, such as guest speakers, including the attorney general, but she admitted, "I don't feel like it goes far enough." Amelia openly struggled with her own actions, wondering if they adequately reflected her social justice commitments and knowledge.

Analysis revealed three coded examples of *social responsibility*—the understanding that we have an obligation to act as democratic citizens for the greater good, to ensure the safety and rights of others. Mr. Q noted that he wanted his students to "experience something in real life and then just write about it," because they "should be able to learn and connect with their community or different communities that aren't their own." Implicit in his words is the notion that students should care about others, and he continued to connect this with the rights of those either in their communities or outside of them.

Minnie, likewise, wanted her students to understand the histories of local Indigenous peoples so that they could act on their knowledge. Teaching about treaties and rights, she said she told her students, "You are living tribal sovereignty at this moment as you're watching the pipelines and all these other things going." She encouraged her students to understand what was at stake for groups whose rights were being violated and to consider how this could be addressed or changed. She wanted them to "think on their own." Finally, Heather wished that her students would become adults, not who were "ignorant" and "don't know any better," but instead who were knowledgeable and acted on their social justice understandings to help others, even if those did not individually affect them. These mentions of social responsibility denote the teachers' knowledge that action must be taken to address inequities in our society.

## Discussion and Implications

Findings show that educators' most prominent SJKs include familiarity with theories of social inequity, the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed, awareness of history, and a propensity for self-reflection. These findings perhaps align well with common practices in teacher education: Ways of seeing the world through critical theories and an epistemological stance that discerns the social construction of knowledge are the key outcomes in many critical multicultural and social justice education courses. Furthermore, as noted in the literature (Cabrera, 2018; Cochran-Smith et al., 2015), teacher educators have extended a great deal of

effort toward facilitating candidates' awareness of their own socializations and backgrounds to work against deficit mind-sets. The findings of our research affirm those endeavors in teacher education and illustrate that the knowledge base for teaching for social justice that our participants exhibited included these perspectives.

Teachers' knowledges of discursive practices, including the ways that language and actions uphold oppression, however, were less discussed in the interviews. Although participants named and explained critical theories, they did not mention concepts of language and action. It is crucial that educators possess the acumen to name specific examples of how the status quo is maintained in systemic ways if they are to communicate that knowledge for students and work to disrupt the reproduction of inequity. Although cultivating an understanding of systems as opposed to individual acts (Boyd & Miller, 2020) is difficult, it is necessary, for to dismantle the systems, individuals must first understand their existence. Racism, for example, has been historically built into the fabric of the United States through the language of laws and policies over time (e.g., "separate but equal"), and understanding the justice system first as an institution can then lead to unpacking how individuals have been socialized to operate within it.

Finally, participants' mentions of social responsibility or public activism were almost nonexistent. Participants who mentioned these elements did so in terms of their curricular decisions. Although we value and wish to affirm those practices, we argue that social responsibility and agency go beyond classroom practice and into the world. Love's (2019) explanation of a "co-conspirator" is an illustrative example: She recounts the story of James Tyson, a White man who used his privilege and agency to hinder police officers from stopping, and possibly harming, Bree Newsome as she removed a confederate flag from the capitol building in South Carolina. Love notes that people with privilege, particularly White and cisgender individuals, should take risks for others and draw on their advantages for the betterment of marginalized communities. Knowledge of the need for such actions and how to practice them is the basis for teaching social responsibility. Thus, for the knowledges that were more limited in our data, more work needs to be undertaken to flesh out what they entail so that we can work in teacher education to cultivate them. Although at the K–12 level, civic literacy projects (Epstein, 2014) and youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) are well established, teacher educators would be wise to incorporate such projects into teacher education programs writ large—not focused solely on classrooms but also focused on social topics and community issues—to establish candidates' understandings of their import (Boyd & Darragh, 2019).

It is important to note also that although our sample is representative of the larger teaching population, we do recognize that our participants were mostly White women. This likely influenced the findings in terms of which knowledges were most prevalent and is crucial to consider as teacher educators develop strategies for nurturing and affirming their students' skills and awareness.

## Conclusion

The knowledge that funds decisions for teaching is a difficult entity to render transparent. In this research, we attempt to delineate the critical awareness of equity-minded teachers that they apply to both their worlds and their classrooms. Our work scratches the surface of examining what underlies teachers' practices, and it suggests that further research should continue to explore the knowledges that guide social justice teachers and to further investigate the ways that teachers might conceptualize their roles as change agents. If we hope to cultivate practicing teachers who are prepared to address oppression and injustice in their classrooms, it is imperative that we know more about the sorts of beliefs, lenses, and theories they must hold to do so.

## Note

[1] Here we reproduce the participant's language verbatim.

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