

## **Teacher Educators’ Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Activism in Practice: A Multi-Institutional Collaborative Self-Study**

Xiufang Chen

*Associate Professor of Literacy Education, Rowan University*

Lauren Fletcher

*Assistant Professor, California State University Stanislaus*

Dawn Castagno-Dysart

*Adjunct Professor, Columbia College*

Jacquelynn S. Popp

*Associate Professor, Lake Forest College*

Crystal Rose

*Assistant Professor, Tarleton State University*

Erica S. Holyoke

*Assistant Professor, University of Colorado Denver*

### **Abstract**

Rooted in critical pedagogy and situated learning theory, this collaborative self-study examined how six teacher educators from different institutions worked to improve their culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and activism practice. Data sources included participants’ weekly journals, critical friends’ feedback, and field notes and audio-video recordings of virtual meetings. Through constant-comparative analysis, three major themes emerged: we engaged in recursive cycles of (re)conceptualizations of CSP and activism, our evolving conceptualizations (re)shaped our practice, and we built a communal responsibility—a deep seated commitment to the success of all group members. This study suggests collaborative critical reflection on CSP and activism is beneficial to practitioners, including teacher educators.

### **Introduction**

Currently, in the United States, there is an urgent call for culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and activism in K–16 education with the increasingly diverse student population and mounting confrontations of different cultural, racial, linguistic, and ethnic ideologies. Teacher educators need to prepare pre- and in-service teachers to be culturally responsive and social justice activists to support their diverse students. Assigned readings or isolated courses on CSP and activism are not enough in teacher education. Teacher educators themselves need to model reflecting and teaching to, through, and for cultural diversity (Paris, 2012; Gay, 2014). While other researchers have examined their practice independently (e.g. Campbell, 2018; Sulzer, 2022; Kitchen, 2020; Gaynor, 2018), we believe such reflections are stronger when done in a collaborative community.

In this self-study, we, six teacher educators from across the U.S.A., examined our conceptualizations and practices of CSP and activism through individual and collaborative critical reflections. Specifically, this study addresses the following two questions:

1. How do teacher educators working across institutions conceptualize CSP and activism through individual and collaborative reflections?
2. How do these collective and individual reflections on CSP and activism shape these teacher educators' practices?

This study illuminates the importance of engaging in collective critical reflections among teacher educators so as to disrupt existing and gain new perspectives on conceptualizations and practice of culturally sustaining teacher education. Additionally, the collaborative reflections across various institutions created space for vulnerability. In this setting, participants could reflect beyond surface-level understandings of CSP and activism without fearing interests and/or power involved as in the same institution. This study helps fill the gap of knowledge on teacher educators' conceptualizations and enactment of CSP and activism. It provides insights for other teacher educators to examine their own conceptualizations and practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two key theories guided our design and analysis in this self-study: critical pedagogy and situated learning theory.

#### **Critical Pedagogy**

Informed by the work of Freire (1970, 2018), critical pedagogy is the belief that education should challenge learners to examine power structures and patterns of inequality. While critique is often foregrounded, Freire argued that hope and action are equally essential to transform the world. Critical pedagogy emphasizes engaging in critical reflection and dialogue to build awareness of social injustices and embolden students to envision and take informed action (Darder, 2018; Freire, 1970, 2018). For teacher educators, this means building a clearer understanding of the myriad unjust aspects concerning schooling, teaching, and learning and taking steps in one's practice that serve to transform the system and challenge the status quo (Montaño et al., 2002). Two key concepts informed by critical pedagogy that we explore in this self-study are CSP and teacher activism. Both seek to question the status quo and reimagine educational spaces.

**Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.** CSP “seeks to perpetuate and foster- to sustain- linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1). This framework responds to restrictive policies that privilege a monolingual and monocultural society. To confront this, research and practice need explicit resistances that embrace cultural equity (Paris, 2012). CSP “has... its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). When teachers expand their understanding of students, cultures, and families; they are able to see events from multiple perspectives and abstain from making untrue assumptions (de Silva, et al., 2018). For teacher-educators, CSP could entail diversifying required course readings or assignments to modeling how to do so in P-12 classrooms. CSP in teacher preparation might also include embracing a multicultural and multilingual approach to teacher candidates' work. It must also include invalidating minority myths primary to schooling in the United States and colonial nations, as well as not measuring students against White middle-class norms (Paris & Alim, 2017).

**Teacher Activism.** Activism is centered around critical reflection and collaborative action working towards social justice (Catone, et al., 2017; Peters & Reid, 2009; Picower, 2012). Teacher

activists seek to “transform an unequal and unjust society beyond the immediate school community” (Montaño et al., 2002, p. 267). Closely tied to social justice, teacher activism is a revolutionary concept (Freire, 1996) that requires teachers to continually engage in critical self-reflection, learning, and action. The process of self-reflection and continual learning is often facilitated by dialogue with others or a text (Catone et al., 2017; Peters & Reid, 2009). Simple actions for change are inadequate without knowledge and theory (Darder, 1991), just believing and reflecting on the importance of political and social change is not enough; action is required (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997). Consequently, “advocacy can be viewed as both an outcome of efforts to transform teaching and learning through equity and as a means for transforming education” (Catone et al., 2017, p. 4). It is a continual process of learning, reflecting, and acting.

### **Situated Learning Theory**

Situated learning theory frames learning as participation within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Informed by sociocultural beliefs (Vygotsky, 1978), situated learning has two central ideas; one is that the construction of knowledge requires an authentic context, and two is that it necessitates social interaction and collaboration. It asserts that learning occurs in authentic contexts through relationships between individuals, activities, and artifacts. Knowledge is co-constructed by the community in ways that continually reflect, influence, and change the practices of the community. This co-constructed, evolving knowledge and practice are inextricably linked to identity such that change in one is inseparable from a change in the other (Lave, 1991).

In this study, we formed a community of practice of teacher educators centered on supporting our own and each other’s conceptualization and enactment of CSP and activism. Guided by critical pedagogy and situated learning theory, we designed our group to engage critically as partners to learn from and with one another vis-a-vis our authentic, individualized contexts.

### **Literature Review**

Much of the current literature concerning CSP and activism investigates preservice teachers’ understandings of CSP and activism in coursework and field placements (e.g., Cook, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020, Maddamsetti, 2020; Ramsay-Jordan, 2021), and in-service teachers’ enactment of CSP and activism (Behizadeh et al., 2019; Catone, 2017; Dyke et al., 2020; Warren & Ward, 2021). Yet, few studies focus on systematically examining teacher educators’ own conceptualizations of and practices in support of CSP (Appleget et al., 2020; Garbett et al., 2018; Han et al., 2014) and teacher activism (Galman et al., 2010).

Often, teacher educators lean on theorists (e.g. Darder, 1991; Freire, 1970, 2018; Gay, 2000; Montaño et al., 2002; Nieto, 1992) to communicate their beliefs and ideas around CSP, critical pedagogy, and activism. These theorists laid the groundwork for maintaining and promoting students’ cultural heritage and questioning dominant power structures; however, researchers and teacher educators, at times, convey these theoretical constructs to teacher candidates without fully enacting these constructs in their own practice. There is an emerging set of studies focusing on teacher educators’ conceptualizations and practices of CSP and activism, which we describe below. This collaborative self-study builds from these studies and therefore fills a much needed gap in the research by shifting the gaze from pre- and in-service teachers to examining teacher educators’ conceptualizations and practices of CSP and activism.

## **Teacher Educators' Conceptualizations and Practices Concerning CSP**

Some self-studies examined conceptualizations and enactments of CSP to undergird teacher educators' own practice during instruction. For example, Garbett et al.'s (2018) self-study explored two teacher educators' culturally responsive practices through regular reflective journal entries, where significant moments were identified, discussed, and shared with their critical friend. Their own awareness and enactment of culturally responsive pedagogies was strengthened as they shared. Appleget et al. (2020) also conducted a collaborative self-study with critical friends where they examined changes in their practice while implementing culturally proactive pedagogies in their university literacy methods courses. By analyzing reflections and critical friend meetings, Appleget et al. (2020) found becoming culturally proactive is a journey that challenged their understandings of how privilege influences decision making in their university classrooms. They also determined critical collaboration and accountability was necessary for discovering how privilege impacts their teacher education practice toward culturally proactive pedagogy, further contributing to situated learning theory. Both Garbett et al. (2018) and Appleget et al. (2020) not only describe how they conceptualized, but also how they adhered to the constructs of CSP in their own courses.

Although these studies contribute to an emerging body of literature shifting the gaze from pre- and in-service teachers to teacher educators' conceptualizations and practices around CSP, teacher educators' conceptualizations and practices concerning activism is nascent in the research literature.

## **Teacher Educators' Conceptualizations and Practices Concerning Activism**

Literature concerning activism in higher education mainly focuses outside of teacher education and is rooted in campus-wide initiatives or programs (e.g. Gilmore, 2011; Young & McKibban, 2014). Few studies have examined teacher educators' conceptualizations or enactments of activism. Galman et al. (2010) conducted a self-study regarding activism in teacher education; however, they did not explore CSP or a resulting change in their practice. After examining student experiences around race and their own beliefs and practices, Galman et al. (2010) concluded that they, as White teacher educators, have much work to do in their own practice to interrogate race and power, a key component of critical pedagogy.

## **Collective and Individual Reflections Shape Teacher Educators' Practices**

Reflection is a significant part of the learning process (Schön, 1987). The value of reflection in teaching has long been confirmed in literature (e.g. Freese, 1999; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010; Loughran, 2002). In fact, it is a regular practice for teacher education programs to embed reflective teaching for preservice teachers throughout courses (Zeichner & Liston, 1987; LaBoskey, 2004). Although encouraging reflection is common in work with pre-service teachers, it remains an elusive area of research for teacher educators themselves (Clarà, 2015). Zeichner (2005) advocated that teacher educators examine their practice so to challenge "existing frameworks" (p. 123). Although there are a number of teacher educators who utilize individual reflection in order to shape their own practice within self-study methodology (e.g. Campbell, 2018; Sulzer, 2022; Kitchen, 2020; Gaynor, 2018), we believe, in line with situated learning theory, such reflections are stronger when done in a collaborative community (Montano et al., 2002). Recently scholars used collective reflection concerning various issues in teacher education utilizing self-study methodology within their own universities (i.e. Alan et al., 2021; Garbett et al., 2018; Goodnough et al., 2020; Han et

al., 2014; Hinman et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2020; O'Dwyer, et al., 2020; Woodard & Rao, 2020), and across institutions (Baroud & Dharamshi, 2020; Richards & Shiver, 2020; Tondreau, et al., 2022), but few have reached across institutions utilizing collective reflections in order to delve into topics such as CSP or activism.

To fill these gaps in research, our collaborative self-study builds on the work of Garbett et al. (2018) and Appleget et al. (2020) in order to better understand how we conceptualize and enact CSP; however, Galman et al. (2010) issued the call to also work to interrogate race and power through activism, key tenant of critical pedagogy. To answer this call, our self-study team investigated how we conceptualize and enact both CSP and activism in working with teacher candidates by sharing both collective and individual reflections in order to examine how the collaborative group and reflexivity in a shared setting support us in shaping our conceptualizations and enactments of both.

### **Methodology**

We employed a self-study research design to simultaneously study and improve our practice in relation to CSP and activism as teacher educators. We worked as both “researcher and participant” to link theory and practice from our “lived experience” as teacher educators (Hamilton et al., 2020, p. 1). We engaged in this process as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) in which we collaboratively expanded our thinking on our conceptualizations and enactments of CSP within our situated teaching contexts (Hamilton et al., 2020).

### **Research Context**

We created our group at an academic conference with the intent to engage in self-study of our learning and growth with CSP and activism. We were intentional in taking advantage of creating a community of practice that represented different institutions across the U.S., knowing that our experiences across our differing situated contexts would expand and challenge our own learning as well as provide a wider range of perspectives to yield a more generalizable set of findings.

### **Participants**

Our community of practice included six teacher educators from different institutions in five states in eastern and central parts of the United States. We were at different stages of our careers ranging from two doctoral candidates, one adjunct professor, two assistant and one associate professors in literacy education. We all taught literacy education courses during the study. Our practices ranged from planning and teaching courses and facilitating professional development to advising students and engaging in long-range departmental planning and revision. We are all female, one identifying as Asian-American and five as White. While we understand the limits of our all-female, mostly White teacher educator group, we also know our identities are representative of the current K–12 teaching force and therefore our findings would be beneficial in supporting how other teacher educators and K–12 teachers might similarly engage in this work. This is especially beneficial given the cross-state, cross-institutional representation of our group.

### **Data Collection**

We generated data over seven months from December 2019 to June 2020. Guided by situated learning theory and critical pedagogy, data collection centered on our individual and collaborative reflections to support co-construction of knowledge and changes in our conceptualization and

practice around CSP and activism. Additionally data collection captured ways in which we critiqued and expanded our views of theory and practice collectively and within our particularized contexts.

Data included field notes and audio-video recordings from whole-group bi-monthly virtual meetings, individual participants' weekly written journal reflections, critical friends' written feedback on journal reflections, and field notes and audio-video recordings from critical-friend pair meetings. All data were stored on a secure cloud-based platform.

Each data source addressed both research questions on individual's and the collective group's conceptualization and enactment of CSP and activism. As a whole group, we met twice a month on a video-conference platform to share problems and expansions in our practice and engage in discussions of scholarly readings about CSP and activism and our conceptualizations. Individually, we each kept a reflective journal, documenting (re)conceptualizations, wonderings, changes and problems within our practice. In addition, each of us was paired with a critical friend within the group (Schuck & Russell, 2005) who critically responded to one another's weekly written reflections via comments, questions, interpretations and suggestions/advice. Pairs also met virtually periodically to engage in verbal reflection about their conceptualizations and practice.

Guided by critical pedagogy theory, all meetings and written reflections focused on our successes and problems of practice (Lampert, 2001) in our efforts to engage as activists and to embody a CSP approach throughout all aspects of our practice. For example, our discussions and reflections focused on gaining deeper understandings of power structures and patterns of inequalities within our situated teaching contexts and determining specific ways to respond and take action. Our critical reflections also focused on how to model and support our pre- and in-service teachers' understandings and enactments of CSP and activism. We reflected on specific challenges we were facing in practice, ways we were trying to implement CSP or activism, or ways we were grappling with what CSP or activism meant for our specific contexts. Each of these reflective activities mediated one another. Often what we read about or discussed in our meetings would be further elaborated and addressed in our journals. Additionally our correspondence with our critical friends was often shared in these meetings and mediated subsequent readings in which the group engaged.

As many scholars assert, the critical friend approach is a "fundamental feature" of and bolsters the trustworthiness of self-study research (Alan et al., 2021, p. 320). Because self-study is not carried out "in isolation, but [entails] a process that requires collaboration," critical friends are imperative to holding each other accountable to engaging in systematic reflection, analysis of data, constructing knowledge, and reframing one's beliefs and practices (Alan et al., 2021; Lave, 1991). In our reflections we focused our writing on ways we embodied or incorporated CSP and teacher activism in our practice, and it is through this lens that we analyze our critical partnerships and development as teacher educators.

## **Data Analysis**

Our first phase of data analysis included holistic readings of whole-group meeting field notes, critical-friend reflective journals and responses, and transcripts of the whole-group and critical friends' pair meetings to familiarize ourselves with the data and begin to determine potential coding categories. These initial readings revealed interrelated instances of one or more group member grappling with conceptualizing aspects of CSP or activism (research question #1) and/or addressing aspects of our practice related to CSP or activism (research question #2).

Our second phase of analysis included inductively coding these instances across each of these data sources using constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) to examine the nature of our developing conceptualizations and practices. We coded the whole group, journal reflection, and critical friend sources in chronological order, including excerpts from each source in a data chart for each code. In iterative rounds of analysis, we reviewed our codes and determined which ones were overarching, were sub-categories or could be collapsed into broader themes. We created an audit trail including summaries of our themes, analysis of evidentiary excerpts, analytic memos, and visual displays. In the summaries and audit trails, we noted connections between codes across data sources to identify links between individual, critical friend, and whole-group development of conceptualizations and practices around CSP and activism.

In the final phase of analysis, for triangulation purposes we read through additional sources—emails, phone texts, online texts—to ensure there were no discrepancies or contradictions to our codes and themes.

From our charted codes, we identified illustrative data through which to share results for our two research questions. Table 1 shows a codebook we used to organize our analysis. Table 2 provides an example of coding with illustrative evidence from data.

**Table 1.**

*Codebook*

Theme	Category	Description
1. Conceptualizations of CSP and Activism	1A. Expanded cultural competence	Instances where we expanded our understanding i.e. disrupting stereotypes.
	1B. Deepening, expanding and evolving understanding of concepts	Instances where we defined, unpacked, and inquired about key concepts; where we pushed ourselves to rethink about key concepts from a new perspective; and where we drew from scholarship and resources to do the above.
	1C. Contextualized understandings	Instances where our understandings were rooted in, tied to, inseparable from our experiences; and where our conceptualizations reflected the situativity of CSP and activism.
	1D. Supported and amplified voice	Instances where understandings of CSP and activism were reflected in revoicing of others' ideas, and in confirming other's voices that evidenced deepening or changed conceptualizations.
	1E. Uncertainty/Growth	Instances where someone expressed concerns and uncertainty about what things mean, CSP and activism enactment, an area of growth in understanding, etc.
	1F: Conceptions of students' competence and progress	Perceptions of students' competence and progress in these areas reflecting our evolving understandings.
2. Reflective and Evolving Teaching Practice	2A. Positioning ourselves as continuous learners	Disposition. Position ourselves as continuous learners among ourselves and with students, and seek to expand our understanding and improve our practices.
	2B. A community of active learners	Action. Instances where our actions/practice were influenced in thinking about what the group said and acted in a way in which we wanted to share with others.
	2C. Reciprocity	
	2D. Student-centered/Responsiveness	Reflections on student responses when enacting CSP and activism.

	2E. Reflection driven	
	2F. Pedagogy/Practice shifts	Instances where pedagogy/practice shifts were evident.
	3A. No hierarchy	Instances of collective decision making; equity of ideas and sharing.
	3B. Authenticity and openness	Instances group members shared genuine questions or concerns either situated in their practice or in regards to CSP and Activism. This included a sense of vulnerability to express tensions from which to continue to expand individual practice.
	3C. Resource sharing	Instances where a group member suggested a resource (e.g. book, article, video, podcast or course engagement) in response to a need/concern/question of another group member.
3. Communal Responsibility	3D. Support members/critical friends	Instances where we learned about the background and context of our peers and then considered ways in which we might support and/or question them to help further expand their practice; instances where we retold experiences from critical friends, and how we expanded our practice collectively.
	3E. Vulnerability	Instances where we tagged openness and authenticity with emotional indicators or explicit challenges, tensions or conflicts that we may not be able to share in our own contexts or communities.
	3F. Reciprocity: being distal mentor and mentee	Multiplicity of roles we took on, both as learners and experts simultaneously, rather than the purpose of the sharing itself.
	3G. Intentionality with process/objectives	Examples of the group being purposive in sharing and conceptualizing activism and CSP.

**Table 2.***Example of Coding for Theme 1A*

Data Source	1A. Expanded cultural competence
Meeting Field Notes	e.g. "Part of our work is disrupting stereotypes – about the access kiddos have to technology, tools, and adult support." ( Dawn, 4/30/2020)
Journal Reflection	e.g. "I now have a deeper understanding of non-binary gender and feel more comfortable addressing without gender specific pronouns." (Crystal, 2/27/20)
Critical-friend Response	e.g. "Love this activity!!! Have you explored different aspects of power- race, gender, language, economic, social, political, and cultural differences, etc.?" (Xiufang, 12/16/19)

## Findings

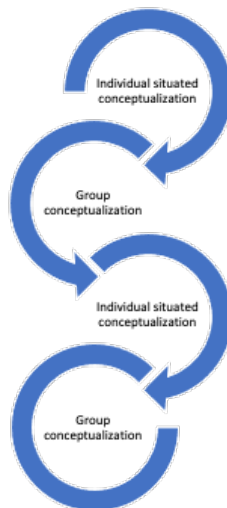
Three themes emerged from our data analysis to answer our two research questions: 1) we engaged in cycles of individual and group (re)conceptualizations of CSP and activism; 2) our evolving conceptualizations of CSP and activism (re)shaped our practices; and 3) we built a communal responsibility—a deep seated commitment to the success of all group members. The first theme answered our first research question: How do teacher educators working across institutions conceptualize CSP and activism through individual and collaborative reflections? The second theme answered the second research question; How do these collective and individual



reflections on CSP and activism shape these teacher educators' practices? The third theme addressed both research questions. The three themes are presented below.

### Cycles of (Re)Conceptualizing CSP and Activism

Analysis revealed that our reflections and discussions enabled us to engage in cycles of individual and group conceptualizations and reconceptualizations of CSP and activism. Through these continuous cycles of reflection, we collectively unpacked, defined, and inquired about key constructs related to CSP and activism. Ongoing group meetings, individual written reflections, and interactions with critical friends provided a platform for us to individually and collaboratively expand understandings of and internalize CSP and activism. Individual participants' conceptualizations were situated and these individualized conceptualizations reflected and contributed to the group's evolving, collective conceptualizations of CSP and activism. Thus, the individual and group conceptualizations continually evolved in a back and forth process, each influencing the other in a spiraling manner (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Individual and Group Cycles of (Re)Conceptualization

Below we describe two manifestations of this cycle of individual and group recursive interpretation of CSP and activism: a) internalizing theories to (re)conceptualize CSP and activism, and b) shifts in our conceptualizations of activism.

**Internalizing Theories to (Re)conceptualize CSP and Activism.** By engaging in intentional conversations with critical friends and the group, and reflecting on theoretical and research literature, we internalized and reconstructed our understanding of CSP and activism. As depicted in Figure 1, individual reflections and conceptualizations mediated and were mediated by views and considerations from the group. These internalizations became visible through reflections, discussions with critical friends and the group, in addition to changes in our teaching practices.

An illuminative example of this iterative process can be traced through Lauren's reflections. In December, 2019, during her first reflection, she described her conceptualizations of CSP by directly quoting scholars like Ladson-Billing (1995), Gay (2000), and Paris & Alim (2017). Returning to that reflection later in May, Lauren commented on how she "relied on the words of other [scholars] to explain CSP" (reflection, 5/20/2020). In fact, in her reflections up to mid-

February, 2020, she routinely cited articles the group read to express her understanding of not only what CSP was but how she enacted it in her course. Lauren later explained she had not fully developed her own “WHY behind” theories of CSP and her explanations did not feel like “her own” as she relied on the words of others.

In contrast, Lauren’s reflection in May, 2020, infused her own words and ideas from the group alongside readings. While still referencing seminal pieces, she reconstructed them in light of her experiences and context to better situate them within her practice. When reflecting on CSP she wrote:

CSP is about showing students they matter. To use Bettina Love’s (2019) words “the ideas of mattering is essential” (p. 2). That is their experiences, and funds of knowledge are not only recognized but valued - seen as educational tools. CSP is dialogic. It is a confluence of voices in which multiple perspectives and stories are heard, so that students can transform what they see, know and believe with the thoughts and stories of others. And it’s more than just being heard—it’s being heard and having authority.

This reflection evidenced Lauren was internalizing new readings, discussions with her critical friends, and group takeaways. For example, she imbued ideas from Bettina Love (2019), a shared reading the group engaged in, and one Lauren and her critical friend discussed in depth in their reflections. Additionally, perspective taking was a concept the group discussed in detail in mid-March, which likely influenced Lauren’s conceptualization of CSP.

Lauren commented that being a part of the group was invaluable to her development as she felt she was “held accountable to critically reflect on [her] teaching” and to get ongoing “feedback from a peer on what [she] did.” This pushed her to not only “lean on [scholars] alone” but also “articulate” these theories “in [her] own words” (Lauren, reflection, 5/26/2020). Therefore, Lauren moved from a more general theoretical understanding of CSP to an internalization of these concepts in her knowledge and practice. Lauren’s experiences provide an elucidative example of what this process looked like in our group.

From the beginning of the study, group members agreed we were in a state of becoming, in that each member had prior experience in implementation of CSP and activism, but also hoped to continue expanding our knowledge in applying the concepts to our practice (meeting field notes, 12/9/2019). We joined with varying experiences and commands of CSP and activism, akin to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation, in which some more aligned as “newcomers” and others more as “full participants.” Yet, as Xiufang remarked, “we all had something to learn from one another and felt a sense of responsibility to encourage one another in (re)defining CSP and activism and (re)interpreting these constructs for practice” (meeting transcripts, 4/24/2020).

**Shifts in Conceptualizations of Activism.** While all participants experienced expansions in understanding of CSP, some participants’ conceptualizations of activism shifted. In December 2019, at the start of the group, three members expressed limited interpretations of the concept and aligned as “newcomers to the topic. For example, Jackie related activism to “having to be outspoken, loud, pushy, etc.,” (reflection, 1/15/2020), while Crystal related it to “get[ting] in your face about civil rights issues”(reflection, 1/15/2020). Additionally, Lauren associated activism with people marching for women’s rights or individuals “correcting others beliefs” (reflection, 1/15/2020). Overall, their conceptualizations of activism were coarse. As Lauren later explained “I feel like I didn’t have first-hand experience with activism, what I knew about activism was mostly tied to headlines in the news” (reflection, 1/15/2020).

However, by the end of the study, a clear shift was evident in how these members not only conceptualized but actualized activism in practice. In fact, Jackie commented that her conceptualization of activism had “grown the most in [her] thinking and practice” (reflection, 5/19/2020) due to the group. She shifted from seeing activism as being “outspoken” to “doing and standing up for what you believe in, even if it means doing so more quietly or in a less obvious way.” Furthermore, Jackie started to encourage her students to be activists. In her reflection she wrote “I now use the language of activism with [teachers] and encourage them to do things they know are right even if it means putting themselves out there a little or taking a risk” (reflection, 1/15/2020). Likewise, in May, 2020, Lauren noted that activism was not initially something she thought a lot about in her teaching; however, she now viewed it as “absolutely integral to CSP” and that she could “not imagine a world of teaching without activism” (reflection, 5/26/2020). For Jackie and Lauren, their understanding of activism not only changed, but in turn how they viewed their role as teacher educators changed.

Similarly, Crystal's written reflections in May, 2020, present a more nuanced understanding of activism. She wrote:

What people think of when they hear the word, “activist,” is not what we are doing here. We didn't protest or make a scene. We gently urged the humans around us to consider thinking differently when it comes to CSP, equity, access. (reflection, 5/25/ 2020)

The phrase “what people think...” almost appears to refer to an earlier version of herself, in which she saw activism as getting in one's face. She later saw activism as taking a variety of forms from protesting to urging those around to take on different perspectives.

Participants' evolving conceptualizations stemmed from key group members continually pointing the group toward the meaning and utility of activism as it relates to CSP. For example, Erica routinely introduced readings to the group that addressed activism in teacher education and Dawn discussed her role as an activist in her school (meeting field notes, 2/24/2020). For Erica and Dawn, activism was central to their work as teacher educators, and they sought out ways to expand this idea with the group. As individuals shared how they were making sense of activism in their situated contexts, members began to examine their own beliefs and practice surrounding activism. Learning about the experiences of their groups encouraged other members to begin actualizing it in their own settings. Over time, based on group discussion of activism and individuals' personal reflections, conceptualizations of activism evolved from always involving flagrant opposition to at times involving more incremental, modest, yet still powerful, acts aimed at structural change.

### **(Re)Shaping Practices**

Our second theme addresses our second research question: How do these collective and individual reflections on CSP and activism shape these teacher educators' practices? Analysis of data revealed our evolving conceptualizations of CSP and activism and the collective reflexivity of our group shaped and reshaped our practices. Specifically, our individual and collective reflections fostered reflection-driven teaching practices and pedagogy shifts.

**Reflection-Driven Practice.** As our conceptualizations of CSP and activism evolved through weekly reflections, meetings with critical friends, and group discussions we became more intentional about our reflections informing our next steps in teaching (or enacting reflection-driven practice). For example, we recursively reflected, both individually and collectively, on how our

course content and teaching decisions responded to our developing conceptualizations of CSP and activism. Our reflections prompted us to be more critical of our practices and to reconsider methods that would best support our students and promote activism.

To illustrate, when discussing course preparation Erica asked, “what is the narrative our syllabus tells?” (meeting transcripts, 1/7/2020), which encouraged us to reread our syllabi with a critical eye. Consequently, Lauren revised her course readings to add more work by scholars of color, and her final project to include an activism component. Additionally, Lauren, who taught a children’s literature course, re-examined the literature she selected considering how the diversity in her community was represented in the stories (reflection, 1/16/2020). Meanwhile, Jackie shared with the group about adding more readings on LGBTQA+ in her course (meeting field notes, 1/17/2020). Furthermore, Crystal discussed ways she planned to rebuild her course to cover more social justice topics such as poverty, race/ethnicity, and exceptionalities (reflection, 1/15/2020).

The reflection-driven practice was also evident in our continuous examination of the alignment between our practice and our visions of CSP and activism. For instance, in her journal, Erica re-examined her purpose for keeping a writer’s notebook along with her students, “both myself, and the TA working with me will be writing our own pieces and keeping writers’ notebooks with the class. I’m hoping to continue to model for them the continual process of becoming an activist/restorative/anti-racist teacher” (reflection, 1/6/2020). Likewise, Lauren shared how her practice promoted her goals of CSP and activism with her critical friend Erica. Lauren explained that her book club activity intended to introduce her students to multicultural literature that would perpetuate and foster cultural pluralism (reflection, 1/31/2020). Erica commented:

This grounding of your motives and intentions for the class session and experiences are so important in the work we are doing. It also reminds me of the conversation we had... about pushing our own agendas and the political teaching decisions we make! It seems that you are clear on your ‘why’ and how you are integrating that purpose into your work!” (critical-friend response, 1/31/2020)

Being clear on the “why” was a throughline in our journals.

**Pedagogy Shifts.** In addition to being more reflective-driven in our practice, our evolving conceptualizations through our individual and group reflections informed shifts in our pedagogy. These shifts came as we implemented CSP and activism in new ways, from rethinking course materials, designing new engagements, and approaching course topics differently. For instance, Lauren used book clubs in her course where small groups of students engaged in reading and discussing multicultural picture books. Her critical friend, Erica, commented on Lauren’s journal that while the books were multicultural and culturally sustaining “I’m curious if there are ways you are thinking about connecting the book clubs more explicitly to activism and CSP” (critical-friend response, 1/31/2020). Lauren responded, “papers published about CSP say [educators] are enacting [CSP] by having diverse texts. However, while it’s great to have those diverse texts, it’s not enough ‘to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism’ (Paris & Alim, 2017)” (response to critical-friend response, 2/6/2020). Lauren continued to discuss this with Erica and over the course of the month Lauren changed the nature of her book club, so that students’ discussions were oriented towards responding to critical questions about the text, and reflecting on how the story would influence their actions and perceptions as educators.

Another example of pedagogy shifts was demonstrated in how Crystal made room in her practice for community building activities. In a group meeting, we discussed how we tackled tough topics with pre-service teachers, specifically how we encouraged White students to examine their

whiteness. Dawn spoke about the importance of building community to support student discussions of these topics (meeting field notes, 1/10/2020), which prompted Crystal to reconsider topics she would be discussing in her classroom. In her journal she unpacked topics that she felt would be hard for students to discuss and brainstormed ways she could build rapport and community with her class to foster rich conversations (reflection, 1/15/2020). Her critical friend, Jackie, offered suggestions which Crystal implemented to establish a supportive environment for students to explore social justice issues.

Thus, we made shifts to our practice, not in isolation, but through recursive reflection and dialogic discussions with our critical friends and the group. These shifts were supported by our communal responsibility as detailed below.

### **Communal Responsibility**

Our third theme addresses both our first and second research questions. Together we built communal responsibility, a term coined by King & Swartz (2016) describing a deep seated commitment to the success of all group members. While we each taught different courses at various institutions, we held a shared intentionality of expanding our practice as culturally sustaining and activist teacher educators. This intentionality fostered a communal responsibility, in which there was equity in the presentation and thinking of our pedagogy (King & Swartz, 2016). As evidenced in our field notes and recorded discussions, we found air-time equally distributed among group members. Though our years of experience and academic positions varied, we stood together in supporting and attending to each other equally. Jackie reflected on this in her journal:

...I am inspired by members who have such a strong identity and have already been activists for years. I am also inspired by the smaller and bigger things others have done in their courses...it helps me imagine the ways I can translate their ideas into my context. (reflection, 5/19/2020)

Jackie stated a key point that by attending to the experiences, beliefs, and ideas of others, we individually and collectively expanded our ideas for what is possible.

Two manifestations evidenced our communal responsibility: We built a sense of belonging through storytelling, and we served as distal and reciprocal co-mentors.

**Belonging Through Authentic Storytelling.** We established an environment of belonging, which included not having a hierarchy in the group. This sense of belonging was fostered by our storytelling, which allowed us to be vulnerable and authentic in sharing our personal, situated experiences. As Lauren responded to her critical friend, “it is interesting that we are essentially strangers yet I feel comfortable being vulnerable and appealing to you for help with questions” (critical-friend response, 2/2/2020). Reflective journal entries and our larger group meetings became a space to retell experiences as stories in our work as teacher educators. These stories invited members to enter each other’s spaces and histories and authentically offer feedback, encouragement, and ask questions. It was not only the narratives we told, but how they were heard that created a sense of belonging and communal responsibility. In her journal, Crystal retold her experiences arriving at CSP and activism:

I grew up in a small town with very little access to diversity...It wasn’t until I left my hometown for graduate school in a neighboring town that I really had ever talked with anyone whose views of the world were any different than mine. Both students and professors talked about stereotypes, biases, access, power. (reflection, 1/31/2020)

This narrative allowed her critical friend, Jackie, to approach their work from a space of trust and vulnerability. Jackie affirmed Crystal's journey and offered suggestions, "It's interesting to hear your journey and progressive development of learning about and enacting CRP. It seems your personal experiences could definitely be used as an asset when teaching teachers who may also not come from diverse backgrounds." (critical-friend response, 1/31/2020)

The dialogue around narratives was familiar across all critical friendships and in our group meetings. In sharing our narratives, we were locating ourselves within our own practice and took collective ownership to support each other to grow our practices. For example, Xiufang wrote to Dawn:

I wonder if you have any activities/strategies/techniques that proved to be effective in your class that you want to share. I've seen resistance, denial, or discomfort in implementation. I am trying different strategies so that I can disrupt (students') existing beliefs while at the same time making more positive and active changes. (critical-friend response, 12/2/2020)

The comfortability in asking and sharing strategies was not to look knowledgeable but to respond and engage in a shared responsibility. While we may be working on our own at our respective universities, the group was a support system to expand our perspectives and practices.

Storytelling in a collective group afforded us the possibilities of stepping beyond our immediate experiences and contexts and into a novel and shared space. The variety of our stories, experiences, and histories contributed to our communal responsibility in expanding visions and enactments of culturally sustaining and activism pedagogy.

**Distal and Reciprocal Mentoring.** Another way we took communal responsibility was by positioning ourselves as distal co-mentors to expand on and from the work of others. For instance, Jackie reflected to Crystal, "I am learning a lot from you about how important it is to be transparent—both about your intentions and your learning (including what is uncomfortable but important to help you grow)." (critical-friend response, 2/27/20)

The stances that we took up allowed for a togetherness, even while we were apart. Lauren and Erica, critical-friend partners, reflected in a group meeting that it was as if they had each other in the room when they were teaching. They elaborated that "we can ask questions in our own practice such as: what would our critical friend say or do in this context?" (meeting field notes, 4/3/2020) Group members' advice, resources and stories guided the decisions in our practice, sometime in the moment. Resources were readily shared and revisited across our study as learners and mentors together. Our work thus became integrated and shared, even though we taught different courses in different communities at different universities. Often the feedback lingered to support future work and decisions. Erica elaborated to Lauren:

... the conversation we had about the personal ways of engaging in activism helped me to offer feedback on [a mentee's] plan that supported a broader sense of what activism can look and sound like. I encouraged her to think about the space for identity work and self-reflection as part of the activism she was hoping to do. (response to critical-friend response, 5/4/2020)

While Erica and the mentee worked together, it was not in isolation, as Lauren and Erica had previously built collective knowledge which Erica then used in her coaching.

The collaborative nature of sharing challenges, offering affirmation, feedback and critique afforded continued dialogue and shared responsibility for our work together. Through reciprocal relationships and a constant give and take across all group members we were able to establish continued expansion of our practice as teacher educators. Xiufang summarized this in her

reflection that she learned so much from everyone, and felt encouraged to say something or encourage others to say something. "It has built a sense of responsibility." (meeting field notes, 4/24/2020)

Dialoguing around our instructional moves and problems of practice empowered us to work as a group to envision possibilities of being and becoming culturally sustaining and activist teacher educators. We learned together and became each other's distal mentors and mentees, which built a sense of support and autonomy. In one meeting, we agreed, "this is a good support network—and a unique time...the idea of the group (is powerful): 1) What we are doing with CSP teaching practices and 2) the support we provided each other" (meeting field notes, 4/24/20). Thus this self-study group supported each other emotionally, pedagogically, and pragmatically to expand our perspectives as culturally sustaining and activist teacher educators individually and together as a group.

## Discussion

### Limitations of the Study

This collaborative self-study highlights the importance and potential of teacher educators collaboratively and critically examining their conceptualizations and enactments of activism and CSP. However, it also has limitations. First, due to the nature of self-study, we were both researchers and participants, which challenge the critical examination of our own practice and conceptualization of CSP and activism. Secondly, as five White females and one Asian female, we cannot fully represent the racial and gender diversity of teacher educators. Even though our identities align with demographics of teachers in the U.S. (i.e., majority White female), our findings may not reflect the growing racial/ethnic diversity of teachers and teacher educators. Finally, this self-study did not include observations of our practice and/or voices of our students, which could further illuminate the changes to our practices. However, the range of sources across the whole group and critical friend settings does provide an in-depth set of data to support our current findings.

### Discussion of Results

This study examined two questions. The first explored how teacher educators, working across institutions, conceptualize CSP and activism through individual and collaborative reflections. We, as participants, entered the group with varying degrees of understanding of CSP and activism. Some identified as "newcomer" within our community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), while several members were already well versed in both CSP and the role activism plays with CSP, as well as the need to push students to become activists. Despite our varying starting points, all members expressed their understanding of CSP and activism expanded due to group discussions, shared resources, and routinely engaging with their critical friend through journals and video calls. This study supports Catone et al. (2017) and Peter and Reid (2009) scholarship on the process of self-reflection and how continual learning is often facilitated by dialogue with others or a text.

Findings also indicate individual participants' conceptualizations were situated and contributed to the group's evolving, collective conceptualizations of CSP and activism. The individual and group conceptualizations, influencing each other, continually evolved in a back and forth process. This exemplifies Montano et al.'s (2002) power of collaboration and the social nature of "growing" as a teacher educator. It also connects to situated learning theory (Lave, 1991) that knowledge is co-constructed by the community in ways that continually reflect, influence, and change the practices of the community. This work further extends Appleget et al., (2020) finding

on the importance of engaging in critical pedagogy collaboratively, by illuminating how our interactions within the community expanded and problematized our thinking about CSP and activism. Additionally this study fills in the gap by bringing CSP and activism together. As this study shows, these two concepts are inextricably linked and our conceptualizations and practice are strengthened when critically examining them together.

The second research question examined how teacher educators' collective and individual reflections on CSP and activism shaped their practices. Findings demonstrate that our individual and collective reflections fostered reflection-driven teaching practices and pedagogy shifts. Gay (2014) shared that too often teacher educators preach CSP but do not actually practice it. This study demonstrates how this can be done, which helps to fill a gap in research and serves as a model for other teacher educators. We were improving our CSP practice through learning from our own reflections on problems of practice (Lampert, 2001), shared readings, and critical friends' suggestions. Our self-study thus contributes to the body of knowledge on teacher educators' practice of CSP and activism.

Through collective and individual reflections, we built communal responsibility (King & Swartz, 2016). Analysis of our experiences reveals that the groups' interdependence was central to us expanding both our conceptualizations of theory and practice of CSP and activism, regardless of our varying contexts and experience. Similar to Montañó and colleagues' (2002) study, changes within each of our practices were mediated by the group's collective effort working towards equity and social justice. In this vein, we relied on one another to reflect on one's practice and interrogate our beliefs while meaningfully reflecting on group members' practice and critically examining shared beliefs and assumptions. Our change and growth aligns with what Lave and Wenger (1991) maintain, that is, learning involves becoming a fuller participant in a community and "implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations" (p. 53). This study responds to the calls of researchers like Clarà (2015) and Zeichner (2005) that teacher educators must examine their own critical pedagogies and further demonstrates the importance of doing this work in a collaborative group, in which all members hold equal worth.

## **Future Research**

Self-study is critical for "documenting the experiences and insights that come from radical educational change" (Berry & Kitchen, 2020, p. 1). For future research, we suggest participants in a collaborative self-study be more diverse to represent the faculty diversity in teacher education such as racial, cultural, ethnic, geographical, gender etc. This way, more perspectives can be represented in the findings. Also, future research can add observations of practice to data sources so that researchers can examine teacher educators' actual enactment of CSP and activism. Additionally, researchers can include voices of their students, pre- and in-service teachers, as their perceptions could offer additional perspectives in understanding the degree to which teacher educators are supporting them in challenging social inequities, examining implicit biases, and engaging in more equitable practices. It would also be beneficial for researchers to follow pre- and in-service teachers to investigate if they continue to practice CSP and activism once they leave the university setting and/or if continued equity professional development is offered at the school level. If such professional development is offered at the school level, it would be useful to study the impact and whether/how it changes the climate and culture within the institution, building, and classroom.



### **Conclusions and Implications**

This self-study explored how six teacher educators across the U.S.A. built an inclusive community to conceptualize and enact CSP and activism in their own practice. We operated as a unit together, ensuring individual and collective expansion in our understandings and actions related to these pedagogical frames. This type of work, when done in a collective community, embraces the political nature of teaching, and the possibilities and responsibilities for making change in our education system. We propose policymakers ensure CSP and activism practices are supported and fostered in P-16 educational settings so that we can embrace diversity and promote equity and social justice in schools and beyond.

Professional development is an essential part of teaching; this study demonstrates how engaging in a collaborative self-study is one way educators can grow their practice. We feel being willing to critically reflect on our own practice and open to other colleagues' honest suggestions are key and necessary first steps. After all, we, teacher educators, should model what we teach our teacher candidates to do. Teacher activism is more than just engaging in actions; it is rooted in "knowledge, reflection, and self-awareness" (Catone et al., 2017, p. 4). As Freire (1996) states, it requires teacher activists to continually engage in critical self-reflection, learning, dialogue, and action. Teacher educators and classroom teachers must have the resources available to them in order to obtain the knowledge they need to be culturally relevant educators.

This study also provides some tips for program developers and teacher educators to conduct self-studies. All six teacher educators in our community of practice were from different institutions and various regions of the United States. This allowed for discussions and feedback that varied and gave an "outside perspective." This model of collaboration can provide a safe space to receive feedback and gain insight from others who may offer a different perspective in an honest and authentic way. We recommend teacher educators participate in similar learning communities with colleagues who can provide resources and hold honest and open discussions concerning CSP and activism.

Education is an inherently political act (Freire 1970, 2018). Scholars have argued the importance of critical reflection for social justice minded educators (Gorski & Dalton, 2020). When teacher educators engage in CSP and activism, they can learn to be agents of change in their classrooms and community for the pursuit of achievement, equity and justice.

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