Pathways to Social Justice: Urban Teachers' Uses of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as a Conduit for Teaching for Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

This article explores issues surrounding teaching for social justice in urban schools. Using qualitative methods, our study examined the ways in which seven urban teachers used culturally relevant pedagogy as a mechanism for teaching for social justice. We found that by adhering to the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g. personal accountability and cultural critique), our participants helped their students think critically about how social injustices affected their lives. The implications of our findings suggest that while the constraints inherent in urban schools perpetuate the injustices of social reproduction, the implementation of culturally relevant and social justice pedagogies help prepare students to effect change in their communities and the broader society.

In urban schools that have long been academically, economically, socially, and politically left behind, there are teachers striving to ignite flames that have been snuffed by the obvious inequities in the world. Despite the blighted conditions with which their students have to contend, these teachers—using culturally relevant pedagogy— are able to implement lessons that generate an awareness of social justice issues while inspiring their students to dream of a better world for themselves and their communities. Culturally relevant pedagogy as a bridge between home and school cultures (Howard, 2003) allows teachers of ethnically diverse populations to incorporate the values, experiences, and perspectives of their students' cultures into the curriculum (Gay, 2002). Moreover, teachers who implement culturally relevant pedagogy are able to "empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 382). Culturally relevant pedagogy has two main purposes. First, as suggested earlier, culturally relevant pedagogy draws on students' home cultures as a mechanism for helping them achieve success in school. Second, through culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers enable their students to think critically about the injustices inherent in schools and the broader society. In other words, culturally relevant pedagogy is a vehicle for examining social injustices on both a micro- and macro level, thereby opening the door for the implementation of social justice pedagogy.

According to Gutstein (2003), social justice pedagogy has three specific goals, including helping students develop 1) a sociopolitical consciousness - an awareness of the symbiotic relationship between the social and political factors that affect society, 2) a sense of agency, the freedom to act on one's behalf and to feel empowered as a change agent, and 3) positive social and cultural identities. Following Gutstein's definition of social justice pedagogy, we will explore the connection between culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice pedagogy that emerged from our research. We believe that issues of social justice naturally arise as teachers implement culturally relevant pedagogy.

The purpose of this article is to explore the challenges facing urban teachers as they implement culturally relevant pedagogy and to demonstrate the inextricable link between culturally relevant and social justice pedagogies. In this article, we will explore how teachers in urban settings use culturally relevant pedagogy as a mechanism for ultimately attaining social justice. Our research questions were: 1) How do urban educators perceive the meaning of teaching for social justice? and 2) What does teaching for social justice in urban classrooms involve? Bell (1997) argues "social justice education is both a process and a goal" (p. 1). This means that achieving social justice is the intended outcome in teaching for social justice, whereas struggling against the social injustices inherent in schools is the process. Our data lends itself toward the *process* of social justice education.

Given that we are examining "urban" teachers' practices, it is important to explain how we define urban. According to the 2000 Census, an urban area is classified as:

All territory, population, and housing units located within an urbanized area (UA) or urbanized cluster (UC). It delineates UA and UC boundaries to encompass densely settled territory, which consist of 1) core census block groups or blocks that have a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile, and 2) surrounding census blocks that have an overall density of at least 500 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau"Census 2000 urban and rural classification," 2002, April 30).

While the U.S. Census definition refers to the term "urban" in geographical terms, it is also a euphemism for people of color (particularly people of African descent and Latinos/as) that attempts to cover up the social ills impacting people living in urban areas (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006). Our definition of urban is informed by the Census guidelines, as the cities in which teachers in this study worked were densely populated. We also recognize that ur-

ban carries with it challenges inherent in under resourced and overcrowded areas. As such, the "urban" schools included in this study faced challenges including high poverty, underfunding, minimal teacher support, limited resources, and other structural inequities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The link between culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice pedagogy rests in the notion that both pedagogies aim to expose and eradicate the hegemony that permeates almost every aspect of society, including schools. In this next section, we will briefly review the literature that addresses both pedagogies.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

There is a burgeoning collection of research on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990). Au and Jordan (1981), who coined the term "culturally appropriate," were two of the first researchers to investigate this topic. Mohatt and Erickson (1981) used the term "culturally congruent" to describe the teaching practices of Native American teachers while Cazden and Leggett (1981) added to this body of knowledge with the term "culturally responsive" teaching. More recently, Ladson-Billings (1994) using the term culturally relevant in a study of the teaching practices of teachers who were successful with African American students. In her ethnographic study of these teachers, Ladson-Billings (1995) found that although they had very different pedagogical approaches, there were some common traits each of the teachers shared, including an ethic of caring, an ethic of personal accountability, cultural competence, and cultural critique.

Finally, in an attempt to gain students' perspectives on culturally relevant teaching, Howard (2001) found that there were three teacher characteristics that were most important to students, such as possessing a caring attitude, the ability to build community within the classroom, and the ability to engage the students in the learning process. As evidenced by the findings in the aforementioned studies, culturally relevant teachers and their pedagogical practices have positive effects on culturally and ethnically diverse students, both academically and socially.

Social Justice Pedagogy

The voices of marginalized populations are often absent from the "mainstream" discourse, and the issues that are most important to these populations are frequently ignored. Social justice pedagogy provides marginalized students with the tools to aid in effecting change. According to Bell (1997), the ultimate goal of social justice education is to combat oppression by enabling all groups to have an equitable portion of society's resources and, with these resources, to be able to participate fully in a democratic society.

In a two-year qualitative study that explored teaching and learning for social justice through mathematics, Gutstein (2003) connected mathematics learning objectives with his students' experiences. He utilized the Freirean approach in which he encouraged his students to "read the world" with mathematics, which he defined as the use of mathematics to understand networks of power and race, class, and gender discrimination. The result was a classroom of students with heightened sociopolitical awareness.

In Sheets' (1995) study of Latino students who were transformed from "at risk" to "gifted," she found that the cultural awareness achieved through culturally relevant pedagogy played an integral role in improving the participants' ethnic identities, which she defined as "a sense of self determined by racial and cultural variables and embedded in a social and historical context" (p. 190). Sheets further argued that in addition to gaining more positive ethnic identities, the students were also able to engage in discussions surrounding social and political issues. We believe these examples are a testament to the relationship between the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy and those of social justice pedagogy.

One of the main links between culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice education is the ethic of caring. Stemming from Noddings' (1984) philosophy of caring as a pedagogical choice, studies utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice education, such as those reviewed here, relied on teachers who cared about their students. In the spirit of democratic caring, teachers cared about whether or not their students faced discrimination and racism, and they wanted to utilize education as a site of liberation. Clark (2006) argued that educators can engage students in the fight for social justice only after they have educated students on "what social justice is and how it is to be expressed in their lives and the lives of others" (p.281).

METHODOLOGY

Situated between critical theory (Giroux, 2001), social justice feminism (Collins, 2000), and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), our research explored systems of oppression and privilege inherent within schools (which manifest through school reform mandates) as well as alternative modes of teaching (such as culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice pedagogy) that help to eradicate these inequities. Schools, as microcosms of the society in which we live, serve as sites that promote the interests of the dominant class, thereby perpetuating social reproduction (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). However, as DeMarrais & LeCompte (1999) argue, the role of critical theorists is to seek alternatives that allow "individuals to structure their own destiny and to ameliorate the oppressive nature of the institutions in which they live," (p. 32).

Giving "voice" to those who have been silenced by the master narrative is one of the crucial components of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998). However, as feminist social justice researchers, we are cognizant of the complexities associated with "giving voice" to our participants. There are benefits and limitations of speaking for participants. As such, our aim is not to speak for our participants, but rather to provide an opportunity for their voices to be heard. According to Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), "the 'voice' component of critical race theory provides a way to

communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice" (p. 58). Our research, we believe, illustrates voices of teachers who have been forced to use scripted curricula in their classrooms, a practice that is rapidly becoming the master narrative in many urban schools across the United States.

As feminist, social justice researchers (Collins, 2000), we endeavored to be reflexive throughout the study. We believe identifying as Latina and African American females, respectively, may have facilitated the development of a positive rapport with our informants.[1] We are both former K-12 urban educators and have a commitment to social justice. This experience enabled us to probe more deeply into the educators' experiences, as we knew very intimately the structure and form of urban education.

Data Collection Methods

Because we were interested in our participants' perspectives and understandings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) related to social justice, we utilized qualitative methods. Our methods included in-depth interviews and a focus group session. We conducted semi-structured interviews with seven urban educators who were identified to us by a university faculty colleague as having an interest in culturally relevant pedagogy and issues surrounding social justice. We sampled purposefully, as we were interested in including urban teachers who believed in culturally relevant pedagogy but also had a school reform model implemented at the institutional level. We interviewed each informant twice from one to three hours and conducted a two-hour focus group session at the end of the study. Serving as an opportunity to collect additional data and to member check, the focus group session allowed us to share our interpretations of the data with the participants, clarify remaining questions, and receive their feedback on our interpretations. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Participants

The participants included seven African American teachers who taught in urban schools located in a southeastern city. The teachers, most of whom had attended urban schools, had varying degrees of teaching experience, ranging from non-traditional teacher preparation programs to more traditional teacher preparation programs. Each of the teachers had a master's degree or was in the process of pursuing a master's degree. The participants carried with them differing philosophies regarding social justice and, consequently, had a variety of approaches for implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. Despite the variation in the ways they implemented culturally relevant pedagogy, the participants all commented on the transformative journey they undertook in becoming teachers who taught for social justice. In an effort to define the research context, we will provide a brief description of the participants.

Alexis Stone,[2] a 27-year-old African American woman, had taught five years at Hamilton Elementary School. As a second grade teacher, she chose the teaching profession after participating in an alternative teacher certification program. She had fond memories of her elementary schooling experience and used those experiences to inform her teaching practices.

Poem McNeal, a 25-year-old African American woman, was in her fourth year of teaching fourth grade at Marshall Elementary School. She, too, began teaching after matriculating through an alternative teacher certification program. Being a first-generation college graduate, she said she identified with the students she taught because their experiences were very similar to her own.

A graduate of a traditional teacher preparation program, Jabari Moore was a 28-year-old African American man who taught eighth grade social studies at Rockingham Middle School. Having taught six years, Jabari strove to incorporate his passion for African and African American history into his lessons. In addition to teaching, he established a leadership development

program through which he mentored African American young men.

Lydia Williams, a 27-year-old African American woman, also had a passion for studying the history of people of African descent. She began teaching at Wilmington Elementary School after participating in an alternative teaching program and had taught third grade throughout her five-year teaching career. She so strongly believed in implementing culturally relevant pedagogy that she purchased, with her own money, an innovative software program to supplement the curriculum at her school.

Treneka Jenkins was a 28-year-old African American woman who taught fourth grade. After participating in an alternative teacher certification program, she began teaching at Bennington Elementary School, where she had been teaching for four years. Although her socioeconomic background differed somewhat from her students, she commented that she tried to understand and positively influence their lives by incorporating real-life lessons into the curriculum.

A graduate of a traditional teacher preparation program, Giselle Thompson, a 27-year-old African American woman, had been teaching fifth grade for six years at Springdale Elementary School. As an advocate of culturally relevant pedagogy, Giselle incorporated music into the curriculum and regularly engaged her students in meaningful dialogue about cultural misrepresentations found in the textbooks.

Beautiful Starr was a 43-year-old African American woman who after receiving an undergraduate degree in another field had also gotten a second undergraduate degree in early childhood education. Having taught first grade for four years at Foster Elementary School, she stressed the importance of paying attention to the nonverbal cues students get when their cultures are not represented in the curriculum.

Data Analysis

Because our analysis was ongoing, we coded our data as it was transcribed and utilized the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which

allowed us to make decisions about how to proceed based on previously collected data. Initial coding was completed individually. We then met weekly over a two-month period to discuss our interpretations of the codes and data. Together we developed a coding scheme that included over 50 categories and subcategories, which we believe allowed us to capture the nuances of our participants' responses. We utilized this scheme to analyze subsequent transcripts and modified the scheme as new, interesting codes emerged.

Themes. We found several interesting themes that emerged from the data. The first was that teaching for social justice involves risk, time, and self-reflection. The second group of themes discuss the ways participants defined teaching for social justice. For them, teaching for social justice involved teaching critical thinking skills, empowering students, helping students achieve academically, and helping them see themselves in relation to others. We also discovered that our participants viewed culturally relevant pedagogy as a mechanism for effectively teaching for social justice. This theme is woven throughout the discussion of our findings.

FINDINGS

Teachers are charged with the extremely challenging task of ensuring students thrive both academically and socially. In this era of accountability, particularly in urban schools with prescriptive school reform models, the majority of the school day is dedicated to intensive "academic development," leaving little time to address social justice issues. This "academic development" often translates into curricula that are "teacher proof." That is, they may include scripted lessons from which educators are not able to deviate (Delpit & White-Bradley, 2003). Teachers committed to raising their students' sociopolitical consciousness, developing their sense of agency, and positively affecting their social and cultural identities must find creative ways to incorporate social justice awareness into the curriculum. In this next section, we will explore factors that contributed to and

inhibited our participants' ability to use culturally relevant pedagogy to address social justice issues.

Implementation of Social Justice Pedagogy

As argued earlier, there is an inextricable link between culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice pedagogy. Borrowing from Gutstein's (2003) framework, we have integrated our participants' voices on culturally relevant pedagogy into the three main goals of social justice pedagogy: sociopolitical consciousness, sense of agency, and positive social and cultural identities.

Sociopolitical consciousness. When asked how they implemented culturally relevant pedagogy, several of our participants' responses included themes related to social justice. For example, Lydia discussed why a culturally relevant pedagogy was important, particularly for urban students:

...This is really education for liberation, and I think that's what we really have to [do], we really need to focus on that in urban school settings.

When asked to clarify what she meant by education for liberation, Lydia responded:

It's educating beyond just being able to graduate from high school and [getting] a job. [It's] education that's [going to] turn you into a critical thinker... getting knowledge for the sake of knowledge... Learning for the sake of learning... Learning because you want to, because you love to learn, instead of just having to.

Jabari had strong views about how the curriculum perpetuated social injustice. By simply pointing out specific questions from a daily workbook to his students, Jabari encouraged them to think critically about the curriculum. One multiple-choice question asked students to choose the items they believed were important to being a "good citizen:"

Look, "Check the items you think

are important to being a good citizen." "Vote when there is an election." Okay, I can see that, we talked about that. "Go to church on Sunday." That's indoctrinating! Right? So [to] the student [who] is sitting in my class, that's not culturally sensitive. Because I'm not a good citizen if I go to the mosque, or to the synagogue, or to the Buddhist temple, right? So we analyze that. You see what I'm saying? And this stuff is laid out there so, and I tell them. I say, "Teachers give y'all this stuff and it's all programming. And then you grow up and it reinforces the prejudices and everything that happens. It's deep. Like I said, "A good citizen stands during the Pledge of Allegiance"...

Jabari then analyzed the Pledge of Allegiance:

One of the [questions] had them to fill [in the blanks] in the pledge of allegiance. So we analyzed the Pledge. "Please look at this: I pledge allegiance to the flag. What [does] pledge mean? What does allegiance mean? What is this flag? And to the republic for which it stands, one nation... What does one nation mean? Is it one nation? Under God? What do you mean? Indivisible? Meaning it cannot be divided?... That's true, you can't divide something that's already divided. That might be true. Liberty and justice for all? Come on, now! So, we picked it apart.

One of the choices read, "A good citizen supports our military and soldiers." Jabari prompted his students to consider the propaganda being promoted through the curriculum:

Then it says "our!" What does "our" mean? This [incident happened after Hurricane] Katrina, so I said, "Okay...but was it 'our' government, 'our' people?... When they say 'our,' you gotta understand who they're talking about... Have we ever been considered in the 'our?' Even when the Pledge was written...originally, [when] that pledge was written, we were still in chains. The Constitu-

tion [of the United States]... all that stuff. They're talking about 'ours,'" I said, "It's theirs. Don't come here talking about 'ours.'"

Like Jabari, Treneka used the curriculum to help her students think critically. When asked how she was able to implement culturally relevant pedagogy, she expressed her commitment to ensuring her students thought critically about the curriculum in place:

In terms of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in my room, just when we're reading certain things... if we're talking about Thanksgiving, I'll bring in other perspectives on who discovered America. [It is] culturally relevant in terms of them being African American because I like to teach them certain things about [the] great things that Africans have done... from that perspective, the African perspective... I also teach them [to] try to be critical thinkers. "Don't always [accept] everything at face value. Also, research and look it up yourself." Because we're... sometimes... just going through our social studies book and I'll just ask them, "So do you think this is true? Why do you think this is true? So, who wrote this book? Who published this book? Don't you know there's this huge industry making money off education?" Things like that.

Schools, as argued earlier, are microcosms of the larger society. Consequently, social injustices such as racism, classism, and sexism manifest in schools through the curriculum. It is incumbent upon teachers to instill in their students a sense of agency to combat these injustices.

Sense of agency. Social reproduction theory posits that schools are sites that perpetuate the dominant paradigm and maintain social stratification (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Treneka's interactions with her students helped them think critically about the conditions in which they lived and placed into perspective social reproduction theory in terms they could understand. By encouraging her students to think critically, Treneka empowered them to have a sense of agency:

Certain articles that I find I may read to them... Sometimes we have these conversations where the other day we were talking about research [that] found that the highest level, the highest percentage of African American males in jail, in jail or prison in our state, was at the zip code 12345. 'What zip code do you all live in?' '12345' [the students responded]. 'So...Do you think that's true?' And then everybody just rattled off a good ten, twenty names they knew who were in prison or in jail. And they're like, 'Yeah, I could see that.' 'So why do think it's so high here?' 'Well, they don't ever have an opportunity, they're not doing nothing. A lot of 'em dropped out.' Right, and so we just got into talking about that, [I am] getting them thinking... It definitely made them think... Some of them really started to look at [themselves] in a different way. We use our language, 'Would you like to end up that way? So...what is it that you could do so you will not end up in a situation like that?'

Poem also strove to instill a sense of agency in her students. She believed teachers must approach students in an empowering way instead of viewing them as victims. She discussed the dilemma that arises when there is a cultural incongruence between teachers and students:

When the kids ask you (teachers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds) certain questions and tell you certain stories, what will your reaction be, instead of [saying] "Oh, I can't believe you go [through] this!" [The response should be], "How can we change this?" "How can you grow up to change this, being that you see this on a daily [basis], what do you think need to be done and how can we get it done?"

In addition to providing students with a sense of agency, social justice pedagogy also involves helping students develop positive social and cultural identities.

Positive social and cultural identities. Part of helping students develop positive social and cultural identities is giving credence to the culture students bring to the classroom. Lydia shared how she worked to foster positive social and cultural identities with her students:

Even teaching here, because I come from a middle class background, and so just because I share the same race as my children, we have different cultural experiences. And I have to remember that as well, Okay these kids are coming, Reddington Road (a pseudonym) is something to them. And that means something different than what that means to me and I have to make sure I understand what that means, I take that. I take whatever Reddington Road is to them and use it as a bridge to where they need to be as far as curriculum.

Lydia worked tirelessly to ensure that her students learned about their own culture in addition to the mainstream culture that was being promoted by the school's administration. When asked how she made decisions about implementing culturally relevant pedagogy, Lydia responded:

I don't even see it as... it's not even a thought I have. I'm very cautious about the things that I expose my children to at this stage, because they get so little of their own culture. And [they] are so negative about their own culture. Our book this month was a book about Hanukkah... I shared that with them. At the same time, sharing with them about Kwanzaa. So I [said] "Okay, we're gonna do that book (the book about Hanukkah), because I do want you all to know about other people. But let's talk about what we do [too]."

Lydia infused her pedagogy with culturally relevant materials as a way of empowering students and enabling them to experience cultural pride. Beautiful also incorporated culturally relevant material into her school's curriculum. In her view, when children do not see images like themselves in their class-

rooms, they get the nonverbal message that they are not worthy. She shared how she ensured her students saw positive images of African Americans in the classroom:

> I put [pictures of] Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Shirley Chisholm [on the wall]... Some people who they [may] not even know about. They know about Martin Luther King, but [not] Shirley Chisholm... and [I] put some other people [like] Thurgood Marshall up there. [They are] part of USA.

Jabari's students had also internalized negative stereotypes. In the excerpt below, he shared how he dealt with this:

> I said, "When you think of Africa, what you think of? They started naming all [these stereotypes]. I had to list all the stereotypes: Black, dirty, naked, ugly feet, hungry, etc. I just let them go on. They were laughing and having a field day with it. I just let them go on and do it. Then, I asked them, "Who's been there?" No hands. I asked them, "Who wants to go there?" No hands. And then I started asking them where they got these ideas. They were still kind of skeptical. I have to expand on [the textbook]. But the book gives me some seeds where I can go and run with it. I look at the riches that we [African descent people] had, the gold, Mali, Timbuktu... Ancient Egypt, over there in Nubia, Aksum, and Kemet and I just explain to them all these things that came out of that era. I let them know that we are the original man. You were the original man, you were the king, the queen, the goddess of the earth, there would be no life had it not been for [your ancestors].

The students Jabari taught held negative stereotypes about Africans. Jabari had to interrupt these psychologically damaging conceptualizations before he could teach them subject content.

Jabari, like so many of the educators we studied, spoke of the changes he witnessed in his students. Here he commented on this transformation:

> I have this [saying] called "Conquered," the conquered mind. I relate the conquering of the African land by European colonizers. We talk about that and what [the colonizers] did to maintain power. And then we talk about the whole slave trade and relate that to now... showing that the same conqueror then is the same conqueror right now. You (the students) are not enslaved in chains, but it's the ideological war that we are fighting. I said, "Okay, so you have the choice to make. Are you going to continue to be conquered, and make someone else happy when you fail your class, when you get suspended, [or have] ISS (in-school suspension), [when] you're acting a fool in the hall? Because this is what you were expected to do." I just show them how that [the system] works. Now [if they see students misbehaving in the hallway] they'll come back to me say "Conquered. Mr. Moore, you see, they're conquered."

The responses made by Jabari's students are a testament to his level of social consciousness and the impact he has had on his students.

Constraints Associated with Teaching for Social Justice

Insofar as our participants were committed to battling against the social injustice inherent in schools, they were faced with obstacles that made teaching for social justice challenging. It was clear to us that our participants had a commitment to teaching for social justice through their implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. However, there were several constraints including school reform models, risks to their career, time involvement, and lack of resources that presented them with challenges.

School reform models. As argued earlier, schools that have adopted school reform models experience unique challenges that often prevent teachers from having time to teach. Poem shared her frustrations with her school reform model's focus on paperwork:

> The frustration with me rests in the fact that [there are] just so [many] outside things that I feel like I don't have any time to teach.

Poem also shed light on how the distribution of the school reform models in her school system contributed to the perpetuation of social injustice. Poem was very critical of the disparities she witnessed in her school system with regard to the racial distribution of school reform models among the schools. The district where Poem taught included a number of predominately White schools:

> The third frustration that I have is the school reform model that we adopted was America's Choice, which I don't like. I don't really care for reform models, period. I just don't understand why [the school system where I teach] is so inconsistent, you know? When I just look at, when I think about my own experience [growing up] and when I just look at other school systems, the whole Fairbanks County [school system] has the same textbook. Every school has the same set of curriculum. And I don't understand how, now I get [to the school system where I teach], and I hate to say it, all predominantly Black schools have school reform models, and... all the predominantly White schools across the line they still got International Baccalaureate and these kind of reform models [International Baccalaureate], they give them a little bit more autonomy, giving teachers a little bit more autonomy, a little bit more freedom to construct their own lesson.

When asked how she thought racism factored into the implementation of school reform models, Poem added:

> It's sad to say... racism is the underlying cause as to why we have these reform models, because [they're] basically saying that minority children in [our school system]... Black children, are behind. [They're] not looking at lack of resources and

those things. They're behind because the companies [that] created those reform models had an agenda. They had stereotypes,... agendas already set [in place] and assumptions that we need to get these children up to par to this status. Well how do [they] define that standard? 'Well, we need to educate them...into the dominant society, which is White.' I feel that way. What standards are [they] measuring them on? [Which] children are [they] using? How do [they] define this concept of intelligence? Where are [they] getting this? Are you going back to eugenics? Show me the group of children that you [are] using [to measure] our children. That's your racism right there because the standards that they're using are predominantly White children in affluent neighborhoods and communities that have everything... That have other resources... with White teachers [who] have the autonomy to teach... Where the parents are trying to build their child as a person and as an individual and a citizen participating in democratic societies versus [trying to get] a child to graduate and get a good job.

Giselle had a similar comment about the disparities between the predominantly African American and predominantly White schools in the district:

They have a lot more resources, although they're not a Title I school, they don't even get the money, but yeah, they have more [resources]... as far as down to the food that's served to the [students]... All their technology is working in their school... Plus they're not required to have a reform model.

Here, Poem took issue with African American children being "measured" utilizing culturally biased assessments. She lamented how other factors like school funding were not considered in the debates about school performance. Poem also critiqued the lack of autonomy in the reform models she utilized in a predominately African American school versus the reform model found

in her district's predominately White schools:

So you get into racism, then you get into classism... When I look at the reform models they put into the predominantly Black schools, [they're] telling us that Black teachers can't, that... I'm not teaching. How can you construct a reform model that gives me line by line or tells me how much time I have to teach this concept to a student and what I should be teaching, when... some schools don't even have that (school reform models). I just can't understand it. So that's why I feel it's racism... because [they're] basically telling me "Well you're not getting it done, so let us get it done for you... You're our robot so this is what you need to do."

Poem's frustrations with the school reform models compounded with the risks associated with teaching for social justice.

Teacher risks. There are numerous risks associated with teachers teaching for social justice. By challenging their students to think critically about the inequities within their schools and the broader society, teachers are encouraging their students to question authority, a practice that is seen as a threat by school officials (Gutstein, 2003). Jabari, in challenging his students to deconstruct the Pledge of Allegiance, realized the risk he was taking. He also made a political statement in his decision not to fully display the United States flag in his classroom:

That's why I [have] my flag rolled up. I feel like we, we are involved in guerilla warfare; you can't put yourself out there. Mine is up but it's rolled up all the way where you can only see like an inch of it coming up. And I [have] the huge liberation flag, I [have a] shrine standing in front of it. But it still kinda pokes out from behind. So it's up. And then I [have] another one that I just got, the red, black and green American flag. With red and green stripes, black where it's blue, and then green stars. You know the whole thought behind that [is that] we [African Americans]

built this. Most of the time [when] I come to work I have a suit on and a tie. I don't come in there with my dashiki on. I think I could (wear a dashiki)... but I feel like it's (the suit and tie) camouflage. I don't wanna expose myself. I don't want them to ever be able to point at me and blame me.

Beautiful had a similar view:

No, it's [African American history] not part of QCC (Quality Core Curriculum standards). [There is really no] time to teach it. But if you look at my wall right there, I got Martin Luther King, I got the Black history there, [other] African Americans. We had to do a cultural unit on Calendar USA and Mexico. Now, [nothing negative] was said to me, but they [administrators] looked in my room...and said, "Look what she [has] up there." I didn't have the American flag, [but] I got it indirectly... I didn't have a lot of European stuff up there. I got Black people. They're American.

Giselle discussed the risk she took by refusing to use a program she believed was not in her students' best interest:

[Reading Achievement][3] is very similar to SFA (Success for All). It's a scripted [curriculum] that they give you. [With] the teacher book, you read through it, [and] the kids repeat a word after you... My first year wasn't so bad because I was new and I hadn't been taught reading strategies in college. So for a while it was like, "Okay, let me just do this." Then I started attending professional development [courses] and reading books and started seeing how this [was] absolutely ridiculous for our children, especially our children... It did not teach decoding, and building for fluency, and a lot of things related to reading comprehension... It... was just memorizing things. [The students] didn't benefit... from it. The crazy thing is that they [Reading Achievement personnel] were trying to prove that kids who had been here from kindergar-

ten through fifth grade were more fluent readers, which they were, but they weren't looking at other variables. The kids who were stable and were here from K through 5 also had supportive parents. So, I really don't attribute any of their success to that program. After I had done research, I just made a stand and decided this was not good for my kids. This [was] not beneficial, so I started to adopt my own strategies... [On one occasion] we were being observed by somebody from Reading Achievement. She came in and [said], "I don't know what you're doing. This is not our program." And I told her, "This is not the best way." I just had to tell her.

Giselle presented a proposal to the principal and the Reading Achievement representative explaining why the Reading Achievement program was ineffective for their school's population. Although she initially received opposition, the program was removed at the end of the school year. When asked how taking this risk affected her, Giselle responded:

[I felt] like I knew what I was talking about. It was really the first time that I kinda actually stood up for something that I felt was harming my kids. I can't say that... it was because of me that it was removed, but somebody needed to not approve it. So that... encouraged me to decide from that point on that if there's something that I see that's not right, not only do I need to not keep it myself, [because] you can know something is wrong and just keep it to yourself. But I felt like all students need to benefit from [my opinion], so I need to make it public.

Poem shared her perspective on the risk involved in trying to organize teachers to voice their concerns to the superintendent:

I'm willing to take that risk. So, anything that I talk about doing, like getting a collective of teachers to voice their concerns... If [the teachers] don't want to [sign their] names [on the letters], I'll take it [myself] Just because I'm willing to take that risk.

When asked what "risk" entailed, Poem responded:

Risk entails... it's like almost giving up your livelihood. You hear about people who went to jail... for social change, that risked their livelihood. They risked their family [and] their own lifestyle for a change... That's what I'm trying to organize now. The teachers are saying, "But I don't wanna put my name on it... But what if they try to pull something up on me?" I said, "You don't have to put your name on it, just [tell] the experience that you've had... [I'll] let them know that it's anonymous." It's just sad.

Faced with the economic reality of needing jobs, many urban educators eschew risk or, like Jabari, risk only so much. Poem was our only participant who communicated that she was willing to risk everything to best meet the needs of her students.

Time involvement and lack of resources. Although it is common for teachers to use their personal time to prepare for their lessons, the toll is even greater for teachers in schools with limited resources. For instance, Poem shared how she spent her personal time searching for supplemental materials:

I always go to the [school] library or the local library on my weekends [to check out] particular books that the kids... can relate to. I try [not to rely too] much [on the basal] reader stories and the five questions in the book... but to really do a theme. So, if we're working on making predictions, we use those [supplemental] texts to actually make predictions.

Alexis shared her perspective on how time constraints, among other issues, affected her physically and emotionally:

I think in the Black community it's still like a profession that's still held in very high esteem. But I think it's one of those where you really have to be a special person to keep in it. Cause it does wear you down. It wears on your nerves, it wears on your time, your energy, you know, you get tired of seeing other folks, who don't, who're not doing anything. You say to yourself, "Wait a minute. I did all my work, and you didn't do anything. Your kids don't know anything. I'm up here making stuff at home, bringing it in and what have you done?"

Beautiful had a similar comment:

This year it seems like [our school system] has us doing so much other stuff we don' t have time to uplift the culture... even doing Black history.

Our participants spoke about having to use their personal resources to supplement the curriculum. Alexis, for example, shared the stress associated with having limited classroom resources:

Well, I think it is a financial stress. It's a mental stress too because sometimes you just don't know where to find the stuff. [For example] you [may] go to Barnes and Nobles. That might not be their top priority. "Oh, can I find some culturally relevant, you know, books." They [are] looking at you like, "Whatever. This is what we got, okay? Eric Carle." So, I had to go to [an African American bookstore] and just ask [a salesperson] for help.

This excerpt also illustrates the commitment involved with social justice pedagogy. Alexis was not deterred when a major bookseller did not have culturally relevant materials. She sought a bookstore that did.

Lydia, as most teachers do, spent her own money to supplement the resources provided by the school system. Lydia extended herself even further by purchasing a supplemental math curriculum geared toward African American students. When we first spoke to Lydia about her decision to purchase the curriculum, she had this to say:

My kids absolutely love it. I don't have the equipment that I need to make it bigger. I'm still working on that so we have to gather around a laptop. I actually bought a laptop so you know that I can use for home and here [school] so that... but they love it and I was kinda like 'Okay, is this really gonna work? Are they really gonna remember this stuff?' And it's working, so I gave them um a pre- and a post-test with just traditional math instruction and then we're gonna go from chapter four in my math book, which is money and I found that on there too, we're gonna go from there, with, you know, strictly [this supplemental curriculum].

When we spoke with Lydia later in the semester, she had even more positive comments about the supplemental curriculum she had purchased:

I really like it. I really, really like it. And it's really helped me in other subjects as well. Because it kinda, it's kinda shown me that I, it's empowered me to kinda make some of my own decisions about what I'm gonna teach in the classroom, and I don't have to be tied to a certain curriculum, I can find what works for my children. And I can make that decision because... I'm the teacher. That's what I've learned from that. Like, even,... I saw the math... "I don't wanna do this for writing, I don't wanna do this for reading, I wanna do this." And I can do this, because I see that... alternative things can work. And I still can find things that work, not just what they tell me to do. My children really enjoy it, like they are, they're really engaged.

CONCLUSION

We live in a world with a long history of oppression that manifests in virtually every aspect of society, including our schools. Individuals who neither conform to what society has deemed as normative nor subscribe to the dominant paradigm are marginalized and systematically excluded from enjoying the privileges that are so freely given to those who do fit the norm. Schools echo society's oppressive messages by serving as sites where students are sorted based on racist, classist, and sexist ideologies. Because many African American and Latino students in urban schools are constantly barraged with messages that they do not measure up to the standards, they begin to internalize these messages and fulfill the prophesy. The result is that these students are often relegated to the lower echelons of the social structure as a direct result of their school experiences.

Culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice pedagogy both aim to combat negative messages by instilling in students cultural pride and critical consciousness. Empowered by positive messages about themselves and their heritage, students are able to exceed academic expectations and overcome the obstacles of social injustice placed before them. Teachers who promote the academic and social development of their students through culturally relevant and socially just pedagogies prepare them to make a tremendous impact on their communities and the world. We found that our participants did just that. By helping their students develop a sociopolitical consciousness, a sense of agency, and positive social and cultural identities (Gutstein, 2003), our participants provided students with the resources to create a better world for themselves and their communities. Refusing to be silenced by challenging the injustices of prescriptive, inappropriate curricula and limited resources, our participants shared how they helped students develop an awareness of the subtle and glaring injustices found in the curriculum, their schools, and the larger society.

There are two major implications of our findings. First, the constraints inherent in school reform models perpetuate social reproduction. The scripted curriculum leaves little room for critical thinking activities, which leaves students ill equipped for careers that require critical thinking skills, thereby perpetuating social reproduction. In other words, students who are not challenged to think critically may be less able to navigate the injustices in society, likely forcing them to remain in the lower social strata. Second, teaching for social justice requires a great deal of risk and time involvement, which can contribute to teacher attrition. Teaching is a labor-intensive profession, even under the best circumstances. It is even more difficult for teachers who must use an excessive amount of their personal time to compensate for the limited resources in their schools. Furthermore, the risk of being reprimanded, or even worse, fired for challenging the status quo prompts some teachers to leave the profession altogether. To be sure, the negative implications associated with teaching for social justice are complex. The attainment of social justice, however, is well worth the struggle.

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ENDNOTES

1   See (Archer, 2002; Egharevba, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 1999) for a discussion of the complexities of gender and race and the researcher-participant relationship.

2   All of the participants' names are pseudonyms that they themselves chose. School/District names have been changed as well.

3   Giselle asked that this particular school reform model be given a pseudonym.

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