Teaching for Social Justice and Equity in Small Urban High Schools: Challenges and Possibilities

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Abstract

In this study, I explore the role of the "small schools" context on the development and learning of two first-year urban high school teachers with respect to equity-focused teaching. Analysis points to specific ways in which the small schools context fostered teaching for social justice: strong student-teacher relationships, interdisciplinary teaching, and curricular autonomy that allowed for infusion of social justice topics. On the other hand, equity-focused teaching was constrained by alternative conceptions of schooling, teaching, and learning; heterogeneously grouped classes; too much curricular freedom with lack of guidance; and out-of-subject-area teaching. This study highlights a tough set of dilemmas faced by the small schools movement in its efforts to close the achievement gap and presents implications for small schools designers and teacher educators.

Keywords: culturally relevant teaching, social justice, educational change, teaching context, urban education

Walsh (2006) called the achievement gap between White middle class students and poor and working class students of color "the foremost education challenge of our times" (p. 1). Many teacher education programs have responded to this imperative by focusing curriculum on culturally relevant, equity-oriented pedagogy and placing candidates in mentored, diverse field experiences to prepare candidates for closing this gap (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). However, more research is needed on the experiences of these "diversity-prepared" teachers once they are hired, such as how various contextual factors facilitate and constrain their ability to implement effective practices for culturally and linguistically diverse students and to work for equity and social justice in urban schools (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Many K-12 schools and districts across the U.S. are also enacting various initiatives to address the achievement gap. The national "small schools movement" was launched to address perennial problems of large, impersonal schools, especially in urban environments, although reports of the effectiveness of these small schools are mixed (Hammack, 2008). The small schools movement is not just about size, however. Implicit in the move towards smaller schools are the goals of creating a more personalized learning environment and preparing students more effectively for life. As Benard (2003) asserted, "Small learning communities are an absolute must for closing the achievement gap" (p. 129), including lowering dropout rates (NRC, 2004). Nieto (2000) put forth that "small schools hold out the promise of equality in education because they can promote the demanding but affirming personal relationships essential for high levels of student learning" (p. 13). Small schools and class sizes have the potential to facilitate trust and

relationship development, central elements in equity-based pedagogy.

Many small schools embrace a particular whole-school reform philosophy that influences school culture and practices. A strong sense of mission (as part of school philosophy) is a key factor in increasing student achievement in urban schools (Louis and Ingram, 2003). Some small schools embrace a particular philosophy of helping students learn how to participate in democratic society. Even so, Noguera (2002) claimed that the quality of education and accountability in some small schools are lacking.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the "small schools" context on the development and learning of two novice high school teachers with respect to equity-focused teaching. The participants in this empirical study are Cal[1], a White male career switcher who earned his licensure in secondary English and teaches at "Visions," an 80-student school, and Kalina, a Latina who is licensed in Spanish and also teaches social studies at "Summit," a 200-student school. Visions and Summit High are two small, public schools within the same predominantly Latino, low-income, underperforming district in the western United States. The school district is implementing system-wide reform in an effort to boost historically low student achievement and to offer choices in educational approaches to families, students, and teachers. The district's large, comprehensive high school has been converted into a number of small schools, each one following a particular model of reform. Cal and Kalina both earned their licensure in a program that explicitly prepares teachers for success in diverse urban schools and focuses on culturally responsive pedagogical approaches.

The study's research questions are: *What is the role of the small schools context in shaping Cal's and Kalina's ongoing development and learning as equity-focused teachers? Specifically, what are the roles of (1) the small school size and its related history/philosophy/ mission/structures, and (2) curriculum, resources, and materials? How do these factors sustain and constrain the teachers' ability to enact equity-focused pedagogy?*

Theoretical Framework

Several themes provide the theoretical grounding for this paper. First, literature on the small schools movement (e.g., Ayers, 2000; Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000) frames the intended outcomes and goals of small learning communities in terms of equity and social justice. Second, from a sociocultural perspective, development and learning cannot be separated from the activities and social context in which they take place (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Putnam & Borko, 1997, 2000). From this theoretical perspective, individuals and the contexts in which they operate are not viewed as separate constructs. Activity theory directed me to examine the ways in which the philosophy, goals, resources, and structures of these small school contexts influence Cal's and Kalina's development and learning as equity-oriented teachers. Third, my analysis of how the teachers' equity-oriented practice was influenced by context-specific curriculum, materials, and resources is informed by the work of Grossman, Thompson, and Valencia (2001) and Grossman and Thompson (2004) who have examined how curriculum shapes teacher practice. Finally, many publications describe the knowledge, dispositions, and practices that scholars have found to be central in teaching for equity and social justice. This vision of teaching includes demonstrating cultural consciousness (Davis, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2002) and critical awareness (Banks et al., 2005; Cochran-Smith,

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[1] All names of people, places, and reform models are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

1999; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2001; Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005; Nieto, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002); maintaining rigorous expectations for students (Jordan Irvine & Armento, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2012); teaching in an interactive way (Gay, 2000; Jordan Irvine & Armento, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) while also teaching requisite skills (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Knapp et al., 1995); using alternative assessments and presentation of material to access students' multiple ways of knowing (Fadel, Honey & Pasnik, 2007); and developing strong relationships with students (Brown, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Jordan Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Methodology

I used qualitative, interpretive case study methodology to investigate the research questions. My role as researcher was primarily that of observer. Data sources were drawn from a more comprehensive research project and included (a) field notes, digital audio files, and videotape transcripts from 29 combined hours of observation in the teachers' classrooms throughout a period of 6 months; (b) transcripts from 37 combined hours of semistructured interviews (27 hours with the teachers and 10 with their support providers, such as administrators and instructional coaches); and (c) relevant artifacts, such as school-issued documents, lesson plans, and student-produced work.

Analysis procedures were iterative and recursive and, for this portion of the larger research project, focused predominantly on specific ways in which elements of the small schools activity settings afforded and constrained the teachers' ability to enact equity-focused pedagogy. The process followed Spradley's (1980) domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis and LeCompte and Shensul's (1999) stages of first, isolating specific items and working to label them accurately; second, looking for and articulating patterns and structures; and third, clarifying meaning through "linking together or finding consistent relationships among patterns, components, constituents, and structures" (p. 177). I established trustworthiness of results through triangulation of data sources, adapting previously validated interview protocols (see Peressini, Borko, & Romagnano, 2004), member checking with study participants, peer debriefing, and prolonged observation.

Findings

This study set out to investigate how various factors of the small schools context affected Cal and Kalina's ability to enact equity-focused pedagogy. In this section, I first present what the data analysis revealed about how certain elements of the small schools models represented in this study facilitated teaching practices that focus on social justice and equity. Specifically, I examine teacher-student relationships, interdisciplinary teaching, and curricular freedom to incorporate social justice topics into lessons. Secondly, I discuss how aspects of these small schools models created challenges and tensions for Cal and Kalina as they attempted to enact equity-oriented teaching. Specifically, I examine alternative conceptions of schooling, teaching, and learning; heterogeneously grouped classes; curricular freedom with lack of adequate guidance; and out-of-subject-area teaching.

How Aspects of the Small Schools Model Facilitate Teaching for Social Justice Efforts

Teacher-student bonds and relationships. In alignment with intended outcomes, the small school and class size at Visions and Summit High Schools create an environment that fosters the development of personal bonds between teachers and students, a crucially important aspect of teaching for equity and social justice. The school structures at Visions and Summit allow for extensive teacher-student interaction. For example, at Visions, Cal supervises only 14 students in his advisory group, teaches them together for most subjects, and serves as their advisor for their four years of high school. Kalina's classes at Summit are not quite as small, but she, too, supervises a small advisory group and generally teaches fewer than 20 students per class. The focus on close teacher-student relationships and knowing students deeply as learners are key aspects of engaging students and keeping them in school.

Relationships between students and advisors reside at the core of every aspect of teaching and learning in the Visions model, given the design's philosophy. In an interview at the beginning of the study, Cal shared his view that "teaching for equity… is all about building relationships with kids," and he considered doing so a strength of his. He noted that the Visions "model has really driven home for me what building relationships can do and how those can tie kids to school much more so than they can at a bigger place." Furthermore, he expressed that part of teaching for social justice is "helping kids feel like the school is a welcoming place and a caring place and a place that they want to be in." Cal understands, though, that developing that atmosphere and the tight bonds with students takes a lot of patience. As he described,

> I've noticed a lot of my students don't necessarily trust teachers. I mean there are just things that are going on that they're not going to give of themselves until they really feel like "I know this guy and I can trust this guy more than anything." We don't have to be friends, and they don't necessarily have to like me, but they have to know that I'm looking out for their best interests. And that takes some time to develop.

In an interview, when I asked Cal to name what he viewed as the most central features of teaching for equity and social justice, his first response was, "Based on my experience and where I teach, I think that kids just want to be known." Similarly, when I asked him what he thought was important for teachers to understand about the students they teach, he commented,

> Geez, *everything*. God, *everything*. I mean, *really*. I mean, you've got to understand where they are academically. You have to understand what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are. In my context, you've got to understand what they're interested in, what they're excited about, what they've struggled with in the past. You've got to know what's going on at home in order to understand why maybe a particular student is acting a certain way. […] So I mean, you have to know *everything* about your kids, I think. You don't *want* to know everything, but you have to.

An environment of caring and trust is created when students feel known. Cal stated that this safe atmosphere encourages—and is even necessary for—students who live in poverty to make an effort to be present physically at school. He shared several times during interviews that it took him awhile to realize that many of his students have not been socialized into the norm of having good attendance at school. He contrasted this with his own consistent attendance record

as a K-12 student in a predominantly middle class White school, saying,

> I was motivated by grades, and I didn't really care if I had a good relationship with the teacher. But for a lot of my kids, the relationship piece is huge. I mean, if they don't make that connection, they're not going to even show up.

Cal's remarks in this section illustrate the ways in which the specific context of Visions' structures shapes the nature of advisor-student relationships, a central facet of equity-oriented pedagogy.

As for Kalina, her commitment and attentiveness to relationships with students and the ways in which the school structures facilitate these bonds are evident throughout many data sources. In many interviews, she expressed her view that relationships with students are at the heart of teaching for social justice and critical pedagogy and will "make or break a classroom." She acknowledged that urban teachers like her need to know "that you're going to be hearing emotional things from the kids, and things that are disturbing, things that are difficult to deal with that are happening in their lives." But, she said, "You're going to have to figure out a way to accommodate them." She continued,

> You're going to have to work with second language learners. You're going to have to work with students who've just had a family member commit suicide, or a mother who just went to jail. I mean, these are issues that come up on a regular basis.

Kalina's willingness to work with all students, but to keep her expectations high, connects to Geneva Gay's (2000) characterization of culturally responsive teachers as "warm demanders." In her daily lessons, I witnessed many examples of Kalina demonstrating this disposition. Students know that she holds them to high expectations, but in every class session, I heard her joking around with students, making fun of herself with them, sharing aspects of her own life, using tools such as the *diario*[2] to give students an outlet to express themselves, and/or helping students make an explicit connection between the curriculum at hand and something they care about in their own lives. Kalina also noted that her relationships with students became stronger when she was able to visit with them and their parents at their homes (something she says she needs to do more often) and attend their extracurricular activities, such as concert performances or basketball games. The small school size and her relatively small student load make it easier for her to engage in these activities.

One thing that Kalina consciously does is to help her students—especially those who might lack social capital, such as her Latino kids—understand how to "navigate through systems" that can create barriers to social mobility. She noted in an interview that especially for her immigrant students, "They know that there are supposed to be better opportunities out there, but they don't know exactly how to get them." So, she makes the effort to explicitly teach them some skills to achieve what they want. The close teacher-student relationships formed within the small schools context makes this possible. As she explained,

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[2] The *diario* is similar to a journal in which students write or draw about things that are important to them, things that are happening in their lives. Kalina collects the *diarios* and responds back to students in writing. Kalina learned this strategy in her pre-service year through observing a veteran teacher.

It's about showing them what the doors are and teaching them, "This is what you're going to face when you get there, and this is what's going to happen when you get there. This is how you answer it, and this is how you deal with it. This is where you can go."

Since Kalina herself benefited from "having a network," she tries to provide some of that for students, giving them her e-mail address, telling them about various resources and people to consult. In this sense, Kalina overtly teaches students some ways to get access to and operate in the dominant culture of power, as Delpit (1995) also describes. Supporting students in this way and helping them build their social capital in a society that typically marginalizes them is one strategy that helps Kalina fight back against what she calls "the system." Analysis of several data sources illustrate that the small school size and student load help make this possible.

Even so, this role comes with an emotional burden, as Kalina described in a number of interviews. As noted before, she is the only Latina on the relatively small Summit High School faculty, and the only fluent Spanish speaker. In that sense, she feels alone in shouldering the responsibility of serving as an ally and a resource from the same linguistic and cultural background as these students. About this struggle, she reflected,

It was tough. It was tough to handle all the emotion and balancing everything else that I was trying to balance at the same time. And I really realized that I need more help in supporting the kids and being there to listen to them. […] I'm just going to end up exhausting myself even more and I just—my personal life and my family is too important to me, you know? So you just have to make those priorities.

Kalina wants to be there for her students, whom she wants to support in their efforts to navigate through and fight "the system." But she feels torn, because even in the small schools context where she has a fairly small student load, there does not seem to be enough time, energy, and emotional wherewithal to do everything important: attend to her students as the only teacher of color on the faculty; make sure her voice of social justice is heard in faculty decisions; manage the challenging demands of her multi-level classes; and take care of herself on a personal level.

Opportunities to create interdisciplinary connections in the classroom. Within the respective philosophy of their small school models, Kalina and Cal both have the opportunity to create interdisciplinary connections in their classrooms. Helping students understand how subjects are related to one another and relevant in the real world is part of teaching for social justice. Spanish teacher Kalina frequently weaves in social studies content and literacy into her curriculum. For example, with the intention of helping students understand the ways that Chicanos have protested discrimination and fought for civil rights in American history, Kalina showed the movie *Walkout*, timed to coincide with national rallies, boycotts, and student walkouts, protesting anti-immigration legislation and sentiment. This film depicts the events of March 1968 in Los Angeles, where approximately 40,000 Chicano high school students walked out of their classrooms in protest of anti-immigration legislation. The students were also fighting for bilingual education, updated and accurate textbooks, curriculum that included Latin American history, the ability to speak their native Spanish language in school without being reprimanded, improved facilities, and the elimination of janitorial work as punishment. The walkouts turned into riots when overzealous police began beating and arresting the unarmed students. After leading her students in a whole-class deconstruction of what specific steps the

Walkout students had taken to meet their goals, Kalina then had them create action plans to articulate what steps they could follow to take social action on a topic of their choice.

Autonomy in curricular choices, leading to frequent equity-oriented lessons. Framed by the respective philosophical approaches of their small school models, Kalina and Cal both have much autonomy in terms of deciding what content to teach. Drawing from their own interests and what they learned in their urban-focused teacher education program, they both frequently implement lessons about equity, culture, and social justice designed to develop students' critical awareness and skills in democratic participation. In fact, 70% of the lessons I observed in Cal's classroom focused on some aspect of these issues.

Although Cal was trained and certified as an English/language arts teacher, in the Visions model, he is a generalist rather than a content specialist. Within the open-ended nature of curriculum in this small schools model, Cal can essentially teach whatever he wants, and takes advantage of this to bring in his own interests. Cal frequently engages students in activities to explore the origins of prejudice, the power of language, and various meanings of culture. Guiding students to reflect critically on their own beliefs, assumptions, values, and experiences and how these can influence their perceptions of self and others and their behaviors is one of Cal's strengths as a teacher. Common questions that he posed to his students throughout the lessons included: "How do you form your opinions?" "Where do we get our standards for talking?" and "Where do our ideas and perceptions come from?" He also encouraged students to consider the implications and effects of various beliefs and perceptions—on themselves and others— and to not just blindly accept them as truth.

As for Kalina, on a scale of one to ten, she rates her freedom in designing her own curriculum and selecting resources as between an eight and a ten (ten representing complete choice). Shaped by her small, reform-oriented school's philosophy of infusing the curriculum with topics on equity and democracy, she has a lot of autonomy—and responsibility—in deciding what to teach, how she will teach it, and how to assess it. This freedom allows her to "put in everything that I know should be [in the curriculum], in terms of themes, topics, and concepts about social justice and equity." Specifically, she commented in an interview,

> I have a lot of freedom to teach topics that I really want to teach, and to teach things that I'm passionate about, and to teach in the way that I am comfortable with. I know that in most typical public schools, they have everything all set out and aligned for you departmentally, the way that they want you to teach. And to me that's so restrictive. I don't feel like I would be as effective in an environment like that, especially in terms of teaching for social justice. It seems almost cookie-cutter.

She often mentioned the pressure she feels as a graduate of this particular urban-focused teacher education program to teach in what she calls a "liberatory" way. This interview excerpt captures some of her thinking and shows the high standards she maintains for herself:

> I could take this Level 1 Spanish textbook, and I could teach chapter by chapter by chapter for every student, whether or not they're new Spanish speakers—which is what I know some teachers do. I could get an assessment book and pull out the assessments from there and give that to them, and I could give them pages from the workbook to do, and my life would be much easier. But somehow that just feels wrong. It feels like I'm

cheating them out of what they really need, so I just don't think that's an option.

Instead of teaching in what she calls a "cookie-cutter" way, Kalina finds many different and creative ways to infuse her Spanish and social studies curriculum with social justice-related topics, as evidenced in observations, interviews, and artifacts. For example, she often brings in elements of popular culture such as bilingual songs to engage students in discussion about issues of race, skin color, and privilege. She regularly asks students to consider multiple perspectives, such as "Who wrote our textbook? What perspectives might be absent in this particular text?" She asks students to weigh evidence as to whether certain historical figures (such as La Malinche, companion of Hernán Cortés) should be considered heroines or betrayers. The curricular freedom at Visions and Summit allow both Cal and Kalina to integrate social justice issues frequently into their lessons.

Challenges and Tensions of Teaching for Social Justice in These Small Urban High Schools

Visions and Summit High Schools are both relatively new schools. They are based on national school reform design templates that are intended to personalize learning, help students develop the skills and dispositions of being lifelong learners, and prepare them with solid skills for the world. However, there appears to be a "loose coupling" (Orton & Weick, 1990) between the theory of action of these small schools and what actually happens concretely.

Alternative conceptions of schooling, teaching, and learning. Visions and Summit High Schools are both driven by alternative conceptions of schooling, teaching, and learning. At Visions, where students develop and implement individualized learning plans based on their interests and passions, the model is radically different from that of most schools. Visions teachers like Cal coach the students and also lead some content-oriented ongoing "workshops." In the Visions model, "learning is talking and teaching is listening," as the school coach noted. This comment succinctly captures a major difference between the Visions approach to schooling and that of most traditional schools. Such alternative roles for teachers affect Cal's development and learning as an equity-focused teacher in several ways. Because of the school's focus on "one-on-one interaction with kids" and "facilitation" rather than teacher-led classes, he does not have much opportunity to practice many aspects of pedagogy that he learned in teacher education, such as explicit, direct, whole-group instruction and management. Cal lamented that "the one thing that's really suffered in this model is my classroom teaching." Data sources reveal very little opportunity for Cal to engage in direct instruction designed to build students' skills explicitly in writing, for example, even though Cal is a licensed English/language arts teacher.

Heterogeneously grouped classes in the name of equity and democracy. At Summit High, the philosophy drives heterogeneously grouped classes in the name of equity and democracy. While this sounds laudable, it results in Kalina being forced to teach Spanish classes in which beginners, intermediates, and native speakers are all mixed together in the same class period. This situation necessitates sophisticated planning skills as Kalina generally must develop a different lesson plan for each level within each class, and then she needs to differentiate for individual student variation within each level. It also entails well-organized and well-thought-out instructional and classroom management skills, since having up to three different lessons going on simultaneously is, in Kalina's words, "like orchestrating a three-ring circus." As one might

imagine, this scenario also calls for socializing students into high levels of self-directedness if it is to work well. Furthermore, to exacerbate the tension, the only available and district-approved textbook is inadequate from multiple perspectives.

Too much curricular freedom with lack of guidance. Guided by the small schools philosophy, the curricular freedom at Visions and Summit allows Cal and Kalina to infuse their curriculum with social justice issues and to select relevant and appropriate materials. However, for new teachers, this curricular freedom can be overwhelming. As Cal explained in an interview, "Beyond underwater spelunking or whatever, I can do anything I want with my kids…as long as lives aren't put in danger." Although the Visions organization provides a website with some suggested activities, Cal typically relies on Google searches to find teaching ideas and materials suited to his students' interests and passions, sometimes just minutes before his students arrive. Cal expressed feeling overwhelmed by having "almost too much" freedom with little structure: "Especially as a first year teacher, that range of choices is almost paralyzing." This kind of "decision overload" also constrains his long- and short-range instructional planning.

At Summit, Kalina has access to Spanish textbooks, but they are only geared towards beginners, and she teaches intermediates and native speakers as well, in some cases all within the same class period. She is not satisfied to simply teach out of the inadequate textbook. Developing her own curriculum, assessments, and resources for students at so many different levels consumes enormous amounts of time and energy and is "overwhelming," as she described repeatedly. As noted earlier, she often mentioned the pressure she feels to teach in what she calls a "liberatory" way, because she is a graduate of a social-justice-oriented teacher education program and an instructor at a school where the mission focuses on democracy and equity. Even though Kalina feels she is constantly "reinventing the wheel," because of "the lack of curriculum support" and the high standards she holds for herself, she remarked, "I would rather have it this way than the other way." Designing her own curriculum allows her to express who she is as a person and teacher and have more of a chance to meet students' wide-ranging needs—although it comes at the price of sheer exhaustion—mentally, emotionally, physically.

Out-of-subject-area teaching. Because of the design and philosophies of their particular small school models, Cal and Kalina both teach subjects in which they are not licensed and have not been formally prepared (in addition to subjects in which they hold licenses). At Visions, teachers (called "advisors") serve as generalists more than subject-specific experts. For example, in addition to leading his advisory class, Cal—who was prepared and is licensed as an English teacher—is responsible for teaching a math workshop several times per week. Furthermore, when his advisory students expressed a desire to learn more science, he borrowed curriculum ideas from another teacher and taught a unit on genetics. Teaching subjects in which he does not have deep content expertise creates additional tension in Cal's practice. For example, he said in an interview that he struggles to teach in a culturally responsive manner when teaching subjects in which he lacks content knowledge and has no pedagogical preparation. In fact, during my observations of his Algebra II class, the lessons focused much more on algorithmic procedures than on conceptual understanding of the content. In one interaction, when a student asked Cal for help understanding a problem, Cal responded, "Dude. I have NO idea how to do that." Cal acknowledged that was not the only time he had had to respond to a student's question in that way. This example illustrates how the Visions practice of expecting advisors to teach subjects in which they are not well-prepared content-wise or pedagogically appears to detract from the

quality of education the students receive.

Cal shared that one of his colleagues believed that the practice of advisors teaching outside their primary area of subject expertise was acceptable because "good teaching is good teaching, no matter what the content area." However, he expressed concerns about that generic approach. By the end of the school year, though, Cal had become more optimistic about developing into "a good teacher" of subjects in which he is not formally prepared. Nevertheless, he noted that he was still somewhat skeptical about the notion that "good teaching transcends curriculum and transcends content area."

As for Kalina, she is expected to integrate social studies content into her classes. Officially, her classes are called Spanish/World Cultures, and students earn a quarter credit of social studies for the whole year in addition to their Spanish credits. Although Kalina is very enthusiastic about the opportunity to bring her deep knowledge base of social issues, history, geography, sociology—especially about the local and global Latino community—into her classes, she expressed concern a number of times during interviews that teaching both Spanish and social studies takes away from the depth of understanding that she could cultivate if she were just concentrating on one or the other subject. Also, she said that her social studies teaching feels sporadic and inconsistent to her, and that she doesn't really understand how to teach social studies in a "best practice kind of way." Instead, she tends to rely on mini-lectures using the overhead projector but said she isn't sure what alternative methods to use. Her concerns about her social studies instruction exacerbate the constant struggle she feels about not teaching in a way that matches her vision for what she calls "liberatory education," in other words, powerful, equity-focused, learner-centered, active, reflective pedagogy. In short, when asked to teach subjects in which they have neither deep content knowledge nor pedagogical expertise, Cal and Kalina display a lack of confidence in being able to facilitate student learning effectively.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

Much of the literature on the small schools movement (e.g., Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000) touts how well the small schools philosophy and model facilitate teaching for social justice. For instance, the small class and school size is intended to create an environment that fosters the development of personal bonds between teachers and students, a crucially important element of engaging students and keeping them in school.

The findings presented previously do reveal evidence of these affordances in Cal's and Kalina's settings (Visions and Summit High Schools, respectively). However, it is clear that some aspects of the small school contexts illustrated in this study constrained teachers' equity-oriented instruction and their general approach to teaching. For Cal, the most significant example is that the philosophy and model of the school require him to teach subjects (especially mathematics) in which he does not have adequate content preparation and pedagogical knowledge. The fact that he cannot answer students' questions about the more advanced math content severely limits students' opportunities to learn robust mathematical skills and ways of thinking and represents a glaring practice of inequity on the part of Visions as an institution. Similarly, the lack of any curricular guidance for Cal as a brand new teacher represents another way in which the philosophy and structural features of Visions hinder teaching for equity, detract from the general quality of education available to students, and contribute to Cal's sense of being overwhelmed. Cal is, essentially, "lost at sea" (Johnson & Kauffman, 2004) in terms of trying to figure out what to teach his students and what to use for materials. The lack of curricular

guidance (in addition to the other responsibilities of being an advisor that require so many hours each day) leads to his having to throw together lesson plans at the last minute. He does not have the time or energy to attend carefully to long-range planning or to ensuring that his lessons display a tight progression towards enduring understandings and specific learning objectives. These constraints lead to lessons that tend to stay at a general conceptual level without developing students' specific academic skills geared towards clear learning targets. With more curricular guidance, Cal might have been able to concentrate more on practical strategies that would have created more robust opportunities for students to develop important academic skills.

At Summit High, where the philosophy drives heterogeneously grouped classes in the name of equity and democracy, Kalina has to teach beginners, intermediates, and native Spanish speakers together in the same class period without adequate curricular materials. Kalina's situation goes beyond what should be expected of teachers in terms of differentiating for students at various levels. Furthermore, partly because of lack of resources at the school, Kalina is expected to teach social studies, although she earned her teaching license in Spanish and doesn't have a broad base of pedagogical content knowledge in social studies. These constraints generally appear to detract from the quality of education available to students as well as Kalina's ability to teach for equity, ironically, in a school where a major focus of the philosophy is democracy and equity. They also contribute to Kalina's sense of being overwhelmed, which she described metaphorically as "feeling like a hamster on a spinning wheel."

These scenarios illustrate a set of tough dilemmas faced by the small schools movement and the schools that implement its philosophy and structures. The potential benefits of creating small, personalized learning environments are many, especially for economically disadvantaged students (NRC, 2004). Small schools do have the potential to create "more just and more humane power relations" (Ayers, 2000, p. 99) in school contexts. Furthermore, the focus at Visions and Summit High Schools on helping students learn how to participate in a democracy, identify their passions, and take responsibility for their learning has the potential to prepare students well for a meaningful life after high school.

However, when teachers are expected to teach subjects in which they do not have well-developed content or pedagogical knowledge, develop their own curricula completely from scratch, and scramble to find appropriate teaching resources to supplement inadequate or nonexistent materials, it is likely that the quality of teaching will be compromised and that students, therefore, will be shortchanged.

Furthermore, the small schools approach of having teachers play multiple roles and attend to the close teacher-student relationships that are central in the small schools model can lead to teacher burnout and, potentially, attrition (see Keller, 2007). The case stories of Cal and Kalina illustrate some of the reasons for potential burnout in small schools where teachers have many responsibilities on their shoulders beyond "traditional" teacher roles.

The present study raises important implications for designers and implementers of small schools reform models. In order to maximize the potential of small schools for closing the achievement gap, certain issues need attention. First, teachers—especially novices—need adequate curricular guidance and access to appropriate, engaging materials. This is not to say that curriculum should be scripted or "canned." Teachers certainly need to have the freedom and agency to adapt content and materials to their particular students' needs and interests to create relevance. However, students are much more likely to meet specific learning targets if the objectives are explicitly stated for learners and instructors alike. Second, teachers' primary teaching assignments need to match their content competency and professional preparation, so

that students have access to the highest quality professional guidance possible. Third, teachers need coaching in how to work responsively with groups of students whose skills and developmental levels vary widely. To complement this support, small schools need to implement sensible, flexible grouping structures that facilitate effective differentiation.

As small schools based on reform models become more prevalent across the United States, teacher educators might also consider how to prepare candidates for future opportunities in these settings, which often look completely different from traditional schools. Guided clinical experiences, such as mentored field placement rotations in schools with various reform models, would allow teacher candidates to experience firsthand various small schools contexts and then decide whether those settings fit their own teaching identity and interests. Hiring principals might also consider whether the reform-based small schools model is an appropriate setting for a brand new teacher.

By implementing ideas such as these, small schools may increase the likelihood of realizing their full potential, including teacher retention and students' robust opportunities to learn. The reform-based small schools model is an innovation that should not be overlooked in the important work of closing the achievement gap.

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