Collaborative Conversations for Culturally Sustaining, Socially Just Pedagogy: Creating A Safe Space for Dialogue and Practice

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Collaborative Conversations for Culturally Sustaining, Socially Just Pedagogy:
Creating A Safe Space for Dialogue and Practice

Sarah N. Newcomer, Ph.D.
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Washington State University Tri-Cities

Abstract

Given the increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in our nation’s schools (NCES, 2020), more than ever we need teachers and school leaders who teach in inclusive and socially just ways. In this qualitative case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we paired up leader candidates (LCs) and teacher candidates (TCs) in a series of collaborative conversations focused on culturally sustaining, socially just pedagogy (CSSJP) (Newcomer & Cowin, 2018), to learn how bringing teacher and leader candidates together may support their understandings of enacting CSSJP. Collaborative conversations may help TCs and LCs share the responsibility of doing the challenging, but necessary, work of enacting CSSJP – work that is too big and important to shoulder alone.

Keywords: leader candidates, teacher candidates, culturally sustaining, socially just pedagogy, collaborative conversations

Given the increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in our nation’s schools (NCES, 2020), we need teachers and school leaders who teach in inclusive and socially just ways. In this qualitative case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we paired up leader candidates (LCs) and teacher candidates (TCs) in a series of Collaborative Conversations focused on culturally sustaining, socially just pedagogy (CSSJP) (Newcomer & Cowin, 2018, in press), to learn more about how bringing teacher and leader candidates together may support their understandings of enacting CSSJP. We asked the following questions:

1) For participating LCs and TCs, what does it mean to enact CSSJP?
2) In what ways, if any, do Collaborative Conversations support LCs and TCs in learning about CSSJP?

Collaborative Conversations provide a forum for fostering dialogue between LCs and TCs, who are typically siloed within separate preparation programs.
Literature Review

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a framework for teaching and school leadership that has been developed over time by various scholars. Ladson-Billings (1995) first envisioned culturally relevant pedagogy as teaching which supports students’ intercultural competence, academic growth, and critical consciousness. Culturally responsive teaching, as viewed by Gay (2010), utilizes students’ cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives as the basis for effective instruction. Expanding upon Ladson-Billings’ (1995) seminal work, Paris (2012) offered the idea of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 95). Similar to these ideas for culturally sustaining teaching, culturally responsive school leaders build inclusive schools and embrace curricula that fulfill the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of all students (Khalifa et al., 2016). Thus, culturally sustaining educators, whether they are teachers or school leaders, strive to: learn about and integrate students’ and families’ funds of knowledge into the curricula (Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Riehl, 2000); encourage students to utilize their home language(s) and cultural practices within the classroom (Gay, 2010; Moll et al., 2005); create inclusive classrooms and schools (Murakami et al., 2012; Newcomer & Puzio, 2016; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018); and design or support curricula that encourage students to think critically about issues related to inequity and that engage students in learning through actions that address these issues (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Irizarry, 2011).

Pedagogy for Social Justice

Like culturally sustaining pedagogy, pedagogy for social justice encompasses similar goals for school leaders and teachers. School justice leaders strive to transform inequitable systems and structures (Gewirtz, 1998) and to establish schools which eliminate inequitable practices, safeguard students’ and families’ rights, bolster student and teacher success, and foster inclusivity, a culture of care, and a sense of community (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Theoharis, 2007; Trujillo & Cooper, 2014). Teachers may also enact pedagogy for social justice through learning activities which facilitate critical consciousness and action (Irizarry, 2011; McGinnis & Palos, 2011; Newcomer, 2020), by using multicultural texts which reflect their students and provide opportunity to gain insight into the experiences of those who may be different from oneself (Bishop, 1990), and by seeking to learn from students and families about their homes and communities (Bausch, 2003; Johnson, 2014; Johnson & Newcomer, 2019; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018).

Preparing Culturally Sustaining, Socially Just Teachers

Preparing culturally sustaining, socially just teachers requires that teacher educators help TCs examine their sociocultural and socioeconomic upbringings, their educational backgrounds, their cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial identities, and how their backgrounds and identities influence their beliefs and practices (Brand & Glasson, 2004; Liu & Hung, 2009; Ortiz & Fránquiz, 2015). Given systemic white privilege and racial inequity, it is particularly important that white TCs investigate their attitudes toward students and communities of Color, reflect upon their interactions with ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students, and identify how schools perpetuate discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes, and inequitable learning

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1 Following Gibson (2020) and other critical race scholars, although APA suggests that the use of all racial and ethnic terms be capitalized, we opt not to capitalize “white” in order to challenge systemic white supremacy.
opportunities (Banks & Banks, 2003; Chisholm, 1994; Sleeter, 2012). TCs must be provided with ample opportunity to develop the ability to design culturally sustaining, socially just lessons, demonstrate care, and foster cross-cultural communication (Gay, 2010; Gorski, 2010; Nieto, 1999).

**Preparing Culturally Sustaining, Socially Just Leaders**

Principles and practices for preparing LCs to act as culturally sustaining, socially just *leaders*, are similar to those for preparing teachers. LCs, and particularly white LCs, need specific assignments in which candidates explore their own understandings of Critical Race Theory such as the “racial autobiography” (Gooden, 2012; Gooden & O’Doherty, 2014). It is also beneficial to expose LCs to school leaders who already enact CSSJP, either through guest lectures or through project-based, hands-on partnerships (Auerbach, 2009) and mentorship opportunities (Parylo et al., 2012). It is especially important to develop mentoring plans that focus on recruiting and supporting candidates from underrepresented groups (Reyes, 2003). Finally, leadership preparation must focus on supporting aspiring leaders in becoming visionary leaders who assume responsibility for the school’s culture (Bustamante et al., 2009).

**Theoretical Framework**

We draw upon the above theoretical work related to culturally sustaining and socially just pedagogies, combining them to frame our study and support our analysis. Building upon a foundation of “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2010), we also utilize key ideas from “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris, 2012). Our work is likewise informed by socially just pedagogy, which calls for educators to address educational inequities and attend to how structures, processes, policies, curricula, and instruction contribute to such inequity. Socially just leaders strive to: raise student achievement, re-center and enhance staff capacity, strengthen school culture and community, and improve school structures, by eliminating practices that discriminate and segregate (Theoharis, 2007). They also cultivate a culture of care and consider how inequities in policy and resource allocation may benefit some groups of students while disadvantaging others, particularly in relation to socioeconomics, language, and gender (Trujillo & Cooper, 2014). For a visual representation of our combined framework, please see Figure 1 below as well as Newcomer and Cowin (2018, 2021).

**Figure 1. Culturally Sustaining, Socially Just Pedagogy**
We sought to investigate how Collaborative Conversations may support TCs and LCs in learning to become more culturally sustaining, socially just educators. With this goal in mind, we utilized a qualitative case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) which would facilitate the investigation of our how and why questions and allow us to draw from multiple sources of data, wherein various views were likely to exist (Thomas 2011; Yin 2009). This case study’s subject focuses on the thoughts, feelings, and questions that were generated from the Collaborative Conversations and how these ideas potentially influenced candidates’ thinking about and efforts to practice CSSJP through their coursework.

**Context of Study**

Our study was conducted at a research-intensive university in the Pacific Northwest. Our campus is located in a suburban area surrounded by many small rural communities. We brought our candidates together four times over the course of the spring semester of 2020 to engage in discussions around shared readings centered upon CSSJP. The LCs are enrolled in a class focused on communication and community engagement while the TCs are enrolled in an intermediate literacy methods course. The Collaborative Conversations are designed to foster dialogue about CSSJP as well as to create a safe space for the candidates to reflect together.

**Participants**

Eight LCs and 26 TCs enrolled in two preparation courses focused on community and communications, and intermediate literacy methods, respectively, participated in our study. Collectively, the LCs and TCs were a diverse group: 24 women, nine men, and one person self-identifying as non-binary transgender. The participants were selected on the basis of being in our classes and being willing to participate in the Collaborative Conversations, which were part of their regular coursework. In terms of ethnicity and race, the group reflected the following backgrounds: Native American (2), Latinx (17), and white (14). Twenty-four were bilingual, speaking Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Yakama, in addition to English, while three others spoke some Spanish. All but three TCs were participants in an alternate route to teacher certification program and currently worked as paraeducators 2. The LCs held a variety of professional positions. See Table 1 for more details.

**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>National Origin</th>
<th>Language(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Renee</td>
<td>6-12th School Counselor (rural)</td>
<td>Yakama</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English/Yakama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jason</td>
<td>Vice Principal (rural)</td>
<td>Lummi, Hawaiian, Puyallup</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ned</td>
<td>Elementary Bilingual Teacher (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English/Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Adelita</td>
<td>Liaison Program Counselor (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 ELLPARAS is an alternative route to teacher certification program, designed specifically for paraeducators seeking to earn their certification and ELL/BLE endorsement. It was created by a team of researchers across the university’s campuses through a collaborative project supported by a U.S. Department of Education grant. Although the research reported here is part of a different research project, we would like to acknowledge the work of the research team who created this innovative program.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position (Location)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Language(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Elementary Teacher (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Middle School Teacher (suburban)</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>K-12 Intervention Specialist (suburban)</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Elementary Teacher (rural)</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>Elementary Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English/some Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Lorenzo</td>
<td>Elementary (2nd grade) Bilingual Teacher (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Gian</td>
<td>Elementary ELL Paraeducator (rural)</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>English/some Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>Instructional Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English/Spanish</td>
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<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Jorge</td>
<td>Elementary ELL Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Maya</td>
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<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Magda</td>
<td>Middle School ELL Tutor (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>Elementary Classroom Intern (suburban)</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Marissa</td>
<td>High School Special Education Paraeducator (rural)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>Elementary ELL Paraeducator (rural)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>Elementary Bilingual Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Carina</td>
<td>Elementary Bilingual Classroom Intern (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Maritza</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Danielle</td>
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<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Alana</td>
<td>Elementary Title 1/Learning Assistance Program Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>Elementary Paraeducator and Interpreter (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English/Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>High School Special Education Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Elementary Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx/white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English/some Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>High School Transitional ELL Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English/Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Ilippa</td>
<td>Elementary ELL Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>Russian/Belorussian/English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Elementary ELL Paraeducator, all subjects (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Russian/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Panya</td>
<td>ELL Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>Russian/Ukrainian/English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Middle School ELL Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>English/Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Arisa</td>
<td>Elementary ELL Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Middle School ELL Paraeducator (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
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<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Marisol</td>
<td>High School District ELL Coordinator (suburban)</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Spanish/English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Sources

Data were collected during Spring term 2020 and include video-recordings of in-class discussions, instructor field notes, written reflections, electronic discussion board posts, and class assignments. We brought TCs and LCs together for four in-class Collaborative Conversations. During each Collaborative Conversation, students discussed shared readings centered upon CSSJP-related topics, including deficit-thinking, everyday literacies, culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy, funds of knowledge, and CSSJP in practice. In between each Collaborative Conversation, we continued to consider ideas related to CSSJP within our individual courses. Students were also invited to post comments to our shared discussion board. See Table 2 for more detail about our Collaborative Conversation schedule.

Table 2. Schedule of Collaborative Conversations (CCs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CC</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Key Topics</th>
<th>Readings</th>
<th>Assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
2. Bausch, L. (2003). Just words: Living and learning the literacies of our students’ lives. *Language Arts, 80*(3), 215-222.  | Written Reflection #1; Discussion Board Post #1; Small group self-assessment and group recorder notes |
| CC #4 | 4/15/20  | Bringing it all together – reflecting on the whole experience | No new readings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Written Reflection #4; Discussion Board Post #4; Small group self-assessment and group recorder notes |
Analysis

We analyzed our data inductively for emergent themes, using open-coding and thematic delineation techniques (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We engaged in ongoing analysis throughout the semester by meeting nearly every week to debrief our observations, share our field notes, and to plan for future Collaborative Conversations. Trustworthiness was established by cross-checking emergent themes between the researchers and through triangulation of data sources. All LC and TC names are pseudonyms.

Limitations

A limitation of our study is the small number of participants. We plan to conduct future studies with additional groups of TCs and LCs who will bring additional perspectives. We attempted to mitigate potential researcher bias by meeting weekly to review the video recordings, candidates’ assignments, and to discuss our observations and field-notes.

Findings

Across various discussion and reflection formats, a range of ideas emerged over the semester in the form of ongoing tensions, concerns, questions, and possibilities as students grappled with what it means to enact CSSJP. Due to space constraints, we highlight only a few.

For Participating LCs and TCs, What Does it Mean to Enact CSSJP?

In response to our first research question about what enacting CSSJP meant for our participating LCs and TCs, both groups of candidates expressed that enacting CSSJP is challenging, emotional work, requiring risk-taking, courage, and passion. In relation to these ideas, one key emotion identified was fear. Candidates discussed being afraid of administrative disapproval for straying from the mandated curriculum as well as fear of failure while attempting to teach in culturally sustaining, socially just ways. For example, LC Andrea mentioned:

We get nervous about getting feedback from administration and instructional coaches – we’re afraid of being judged – it’s about bettering our students, not ourselves – yet, we choose to do what we know because we’re afraid to fail at something we don’t know how to do. (In-class Discussion, 2/19/20)

Candidates also mentioned fear of getting into trouble for touching or hugging students, although many felt that students often need a reassuring pat on the shoulder or a hug from a caring adult. Others spoke of the need for educators to be passionate in order to sustain this work. LC Laura noted, “Teaching is a craft, you have to have passion, and we are very energized now… but you have to be prepared for those barriers and what you’re going to do, so you can sustain the passion for the long run” (In-class discussion, 2/19/20).

The candidates also acknowledged that such challenging and emotional work requires risk-taking and courage. Reporting out to the whole combined class about her small group’s discussion, TC Magda noted:

One of the main points that we talked about was that we must be willing to take risks, like, especially the administrators … and then, with that, be mindful of our personal biases and assumptions. (In-class Discussion, 3/25/20)
Gian reflected, “Administrators make a difference for schools and need to engage with the community to make a better relationship. It took courage to do what Jim [a principal the candidates read about] did” (Written Reflection, 3/25/20).

This theme of risk-taking continued through to our last Collaborative Conversation. TC Michael commented:

It seems to be, like, a pattern that's happening with all the report outs and share outs, there's, like, energy and enthusiasm and there's a counter dynamic of how do we stay safe while doing this? … I'm of the belief that, you know, to really authentically teach people, you have to take a risk. And, so, it's a question of how much, in what direction, going into these kinds of projects? (In-class Discussion, 4/15/20)

In response to this worry, LC Jason shared a story about taking a risk with his students when he was a teacher. He explained that several of the Native Hawaiian students in his art class did not want to participate in the assignment he had given. Rather than demanding that these students complete the art assignment, he gave the students the option to play their ukuleles instead:

You know ... the kids liked it and kids were drawing and they were singing along with the songs ... and that’s not traditional, you know, because a traditional way would have been more or less like, no, you have to do the assignment.... if people come in and they see what I’m doing, I don’t think I would be criticized or anything like that, but it was a risk that I definitely took. (In-class Discussion, 4/15/20)

Through LC Jason’s story, he seemed to be reassuring the other candidates that risks could work out.

Building on Jason’s anecdote about the risk taken during the art lesson, another LC, Ned, offered his perspective that enacting CSSJP is manageable:

I love [his story] because being authentic is, you see so many curriculums that are like so formulaic and traditional with trying to be, like, culturally inclusive and a lot of the best inclusivity, I think happens on a case by case basis … It’s just being flexible. (In-class Discussion, 4/15/20)

Another ongoing tension centered upon the role of educators and the purpose of school. This tension emerged through discussion of the term “marginalized lifestyle” (Hadjistassou, 2008, p. 220), part of a longer quote describing scholarship from the 1950s-1970s, promulgating the idea that African American children, in particular, due to an “intellectually deprived environment” and “perceived deficient linguistic and socialization systems” were unable to advance themselves and settled for a “marginalized lifestyle.” While some candidates misinterpreted this as a call to help students break out of intergenerational poverty, many others pointed out how children’s home lives and communities were not something to escape from and it was not up to teachers to “fix” them.

TC Alana commented:

The whole deficit-based education, to change them, to make them better, when that’s not what’s necessary . . . because, you know, as a white middle class woman, that’s not my job
to make them look or act like me. It’s to show them how to use all the tools in their own toolbox. (In-class discussion, 1/22/20)

TC Lorenzo worried that schools send the message that, “What they are learning has more value than what they have” (In-class discussion, 2/19/20) while LC Laura asserted that valuing students for who they are is foundational: “Kids have to feel valued before learning can happen” (In-class discussion, 2/19/20). In a later conversation, Alana noted, “It's obviously, like, really challenging to face white privilege and how maybe the whole institution of education is destructive to some of our students” (In-class Discussion, 3/25/20).

In What Ways, If Any, Do Collaborative Conversations Support LCs and TCs in Learning About CSSJP?

In response to our second research question, engaging in Collaborative Conversations supported LCs’ and TCs’ learning by providing an opportunity to reflect on the roles, responsibilities, and possibilities for both teachers and school leaders in enacting CSSJP. This finding points to the value of fostering dialogue between TCs and LCs during their preparation coursework, which hopefully continues later on, once on the job. Evidence of this mutual understanding was observed in several ways.

One way we observed this cross-perspective taking was through conversations we had with our individual classes between our Collaborative Conversation sessions. For example, during her debrief with her LCs after our first Collaborative Conversation, Kathleen’s students expressed their concern that perhaps they had “taken over” too much during the initial small group conversations. Going forward, they wanted to be more mindful of leading by inviting quieter voices into the conversation and facilitating shared speaking time. Likewise, Sarah’s TCs brought up questions they wanted to discuss with the LCs. After reading The Circuit by Francisco Jiménez (1997), they wanted to ask the LCs how they might respond if U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement tried to apprehend students at their school, as had happened in the story.

TCs and LCs, both, also gained insight into the many responsibilities of principals. After reading our article (Newcomer & Cowin, 2018) focusing on how one school principal transformed his school’s culture by incorporating the students’ and families’ native language of Spanish into daily life and operation, as well as by honoring and celebrating families’ cultural practices, TC Alana, speaking on behalf of her group explained:

Ilippa was talking about how, when she was reading the second article, that it really opened up her eyes to how much weight, and how much, principals have to juggle around, students’ culture in the schools, parents’ involvement, pressures from admin, and then also politics, how that enters the school. (In-class Discussion, 3/25/20)

Despite these challenges and difficulties, candidates also discussed how school leaders and teachers possess the power to support student success and self-empowerment. On behalf of her group, TC Amanda reported that:

A final thought that connects both articles … Their [the students’] bilingual abilities developed a critical consciousness and helped them learn about themselves and of what they were capable. So, we really believe that administrators and teachers have the power
to empower students into the learning process and become successful. (In-class Discussion, 3/25/20)

During our final Collaborative Conversation, both LCs and TCs also reflected on the value of being able to have these kinds of conversations together. TC Gian remarked how he never had these kinds of conversations with the teachers and leaders at his school:

We talked about how one thing that we would reflect on is how we would be able to have these conversations with admins and teachers within our schools … I'm really thankful for this because this is something that, you know, we never, at least, I, [never] get to experience with my admin at my school or my teachers within. (In-class Discussion, 4/15/20)

Gian’s quote underscores the idea that teachers and leaders – and teacher and leader candidates – need more opportunities to engage in safe and open discussions together centered around a range of topics related to teaching, learning, and leadership.

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

The Collaborative Conversations supported the TCs’ and LCs’ learning in a variety of ways. One way the Collaborative Conversations supported the candidates was by serving as an outlet for the candidates to share emotions such as fear, doubt, and worry. Sharing such feelings can often leave one feeling vulnerable and exposed, yet the candidates seemed to feel comfortable and safe enough during the Collaborative Conversations to do so. Candidates also shared their passion, excitement, and inspiration with one another and talked together about the idea that enacting CSSJP requires risk-taking and courage. By sharing their excitement, they seemed to be reassuring one another that they could do the work. In addition to providing a safe space for expressing feelings, the Collaborative Conversations also supported the candidates in engaging with challenging ideas, such as the deficit-based concept of “marginalized lifestyles” which arose from the Hadjistassou (2008) reading. The discussions also led some candidates to articulate their understandings of their own white privilege and the need for teachers, particularly white teachers, to be acutely aware of their positionality and role when teaching students from racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds different from their own to ensure that teachers do not impose their own beliefs and perspectives upon students.

Through their interactions, the candidates were able to support one another’s thinking and to build upon each other’s ideas. For example, when TC Michael expressed his questions about “how do we stay safe while doing this?” and “how much [and] in what direction?” LCs, Jason and Ned, were able to offer reassurance and possibilities through the stories and ideas they shared in response. They also helped each other to recognize the power that they do possess, albeit for teachers and leaders at different levels, to enact CSSJP, such as when TC Amanda suggested that both administrators and teachers can “empower students into the learning process and become successful.” Finally, the candidates gained greater appreciation for the work that each does. They were able to see the work of CSSJP across their different roles and perspectives, such as when the LCs reflected upon the value of actively listening to teachers. In addition, the TCs wanted to ask the LCs how to respond if Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers should come to the school. The TCs in particular expressed gaining deeper insight into the many responsibilities and
pressures that principals navigate. Finally, the candidates also expressed that they benefitted from the Collaborative Conversations and, as TC Gian mentioned, were thankful for them.

**Implications**

A key implication for educational leader preparation programs is to bring LCs and TCs together during their preparation to learn about and discuss issues related to CSSJP. Uniting LCs and TCs in learning about CSSJP is important because neither principals, nor teachers, can do the work of creating culturally sustaining and socially just schools alone. Reading and talking about what they can do together not only provides an opportunity for mutual consideration of how to implement CSSJP, it fosters dialogue between LCs and TCs, who are typically siloed within separate preparation programs. Once on the job, the imbalance of power between administrators and teachers often leads to the kinds of fears expressed by the candidates – fear of being judged or reprimanded for teaching in ways counter to prescribed curriculum. Yet, teachers also act as leaders through the many pedagogical decisions they make every day – within their classrooms and across the school. In turn, the principal, and other school leaders, may either support or thwart teachers’ efforts, through their policies, procedures, and other leadership actions.

A key implication of our study for school leaders is to consider how school leadership is a shared process. Teachers and administrators must work together, through shared leadership, to collectively create culturally sustaining, socially just schools. Bringing teacher and leader candidates together, while still in their preparation programs, provides a safe space for candidates to practice this work and to begin thinking and talking about how to do this work together. Such “courageous conversations” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 10) may help alleviate future fears and provide candidates with the opportunity to begin to build courage and develop stamina for tackling similar difficult conversations in the future. Collaborative Conversations offer TCs and LCs the opportunity to share the responsibility of doing the challenging, but necessary, work of enacting CSSJP – work that is too big and important to shoulder alone.
References


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