



## *Teaching for Change: New Teachers' Experiences with and Visions for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*

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Noah Borrero, University of San Francisco  
Asra Ziauddin, Jefferson Union High School District, Dale City California  
Alexandra Ahn, Aspire Richmond California College Preparatory Academy

### **Abstract**

*This paper presents the voices of thirteen pre- and in-service teachers to showcase their perspectives of culturally relevant pedagogy as a teaching framework. Positionality, critical consciousness, and cultural assets are used as foundations to explore social justice pedagogy. These new teachers discuss the challenges they face in making the transition from the university to the K-12 classroom. Specifically, they identify generalized assumptions about ethnicity by practicing teachers to underscore the existing models for cultural relevance at their school sites. They speak to confronting these generalizations by trying to authentically center their students' lived experiences in their pedagogy and building curriculum that focuses on students' strengths. Findings are discussed in terms of the need for us as teacher educators to learn from and with new teachers to model equitable practices and develop programs that push traditional understandings of culturally relevant pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** *culturally relevant pedagogy; new teachers; teaching for social justice; urban education*

### **Introduction**

While attacks on public education in the United States continue to focus on monolithic conceptions of academic achievement and the differences of test scores between students of Color and White students, the voices of actual classroom teachers remain silenced (Kincheloe, 2008). This is in part because teachers have historically been removed from national policy and debate about education reform, and because current trends towards standardization and testing are stripping teachers of their agency and ingenuity (e.g. Kumashiro, 2012). The blaming of teachers is not necessarily new, nor is the reductionistic portrayal of student achievement and success (Ayers & Ayers, 2014). However, as teacher educators and scholars committed to equity and access for all students, we must find new and effective ways to amplify the voices of classroom teachers in educational research.

One possibility is to focus on what is new in our schools and in our university programs. We can envision a movement of new teachers who hold the potential to bring change that not only resists the pressure to make our schools laboratories for test makers, but in the process re-ignites

the learning power and potential of our diverse and talented students. The fact is that the number of new teachers entering our urban schools continues to grow (Kaiser, 2011) and there is a contingent of these teachers who are entering the profession not just to bring more equitable educational experiences back to their own communities, but to radically change the very education they received in their community schools (Kohli, 2012). These teachers hold the potential to impact students' lives for the better daily, and to help us, as educational researchers and teacher educators, counter the contemporary narrative that youth of Color—their schools, their teachers, and their communities—are not successful.

As a step in the process of countering this deficit narrative (Yosso, 2005), this article attempts to present the voices of a group of new teachers in a teacher education program committed to preparing urban teachers with a commitment to social justice (Borrero, 2016). As a part of their acceptance into this teacher education program, all of the participants expressed a focus on working to provide more equitable educational opportunities for urban youth. In this way, these new teachers are part of a wave of new educators who see their career choice as one of being a change agent (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Kohli, 2012; Picower, 2012). They are not on a fast track to earn their teaching credential, and they do not envision teaching as something they will do for a year or two before moving on to another career. These are folks who have embarked on a journey towards earning their master's degree as urban educators and who express a critical social analysis as a part of their vision for teaching (Makaiau & Freese, 2013). Listening to a group of new teachers like this is paramount for us as teacher educators to develop and expand our understandings of preparing candidates to teach in urban contexts, and it is also part of a generative process towards envisioning sustainable change in our schools (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Latta & Olafson, 2006).

### **Theoretical Framework: The Importance of Teachers and Teaching for Justice**

The contemporary attack on public education creates both explicit and implicit implications for teachers and teaching. A continued focus on standardization and testing is proliferating data, research, and a national discourse fixated on very narrow views of achievement (Bartolome, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2014). A single metric—an Academic Performance Index (API) score that supposedly measures an individual school's progress as determined by standardized testing—is being used to define academic success. Further, an individual student's score on these very same state-mandated tests is being viewed as the sole identifier of academic achievement (Kumashiro, 2012). And, for students of Color, the comparison of this metric to that of Caucasian students defines their supposed school failure (e.g. Ayers & Ayers, 2014). While this comparison is not new (Rist, 1970), and the production of such discrepancies between students from different racial backgrounds has long been documented in our schools (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), the insidious effects of this often-referred-to achievement gap reach far beyond statistical analyses. For example, many teachers—and especially new teachers—exist in a rigidly scrutinized pedagogical reality in which their success is also determined by these tests. They often enter schools where the pressure to “pass” standardized tests is expected to be the sole focus of their teaching (Kincheloe, 2008; Kumashiro, 2012).

When students, and particularly students of Color, do not “pass” these standardized tests, there are again both explicit and implicit consequences. In the classroom, the result is often more tests—or certainly more preparation for tests (Spring, 2004). Additionally, there is an inherent blaming that occurs—a blame focused on students (and their families) and teachers (Kumashiro, 2012; Latta & Olafson, 2006) that fails to acknowledge the structural inequities that lie at the base of our educational system (e.g. Duncan-Andrade, 2007). This deficit-orientation refuses to see the

academic strengths and successes that many students do exhibit (e.g. Camangian, 2010), and frames academic achievement as a one-dimensional and static construct (Nieto, 2002). Combined, these results leave our urban public schools stripped of many things that encourage students' critical thinking and creativity (e.g. art, science, social studies, music, physical education, etc.), and create expectations for teachers that prioritize pre-determined outcomes over relational, dialogic, and investigative learning. For many new teachers, this means enacting a pedagogy based on worksheets from scripted curricula—something that neither drew them to the profession nor brings them a sense of worth as professionals (Borrero, Flores, & de la Cruz, 2016).

### **Teacher Education and Teaching for Social Justice**

Given these attacks, the importance of teachers—and teaching—for social justice is heightened. It is in the resistance against these oppressive reforms that we as teacher educators committed to equitable schooling must come together (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Particularly, we must be part of a movement of teachers who are committed to positively impacting students' lives daily. We contend that new teachers must play a vital role in this and, thus, teacher education programs need to rise to the calling and create educational spaces for new teachers to continue a learning process as pedagogues that will lead to transformative, liberatory education (Freire, 1970) in local public schools—an education that sees students, families, and communities as the holders and creators of the knowledges and cultural assets needed to foster meaningful change (Camangian, 2013; White, 2009).

In this study, we highlight three tenets of a teacher education program working towards social justice in education via this type of experience for new teachers: positionality, critical consciousness, and harnessing cultural assets. We present positionality as not only a deeply personal reflection of one's own biases and perspectives, but the purposeful interrogation of power, oppression, and privilege in given contexts (Kohli, 2012). The goal of this interrogation cannot rest here. As teachers, we need to push the purpose of continually addressing our own positionality as a key aspect of our relationship-building with youth (Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005; Nieto, 2002). More specifically, positionality becomes a mechanism to disrupt cycles of racism and oppression through the examination of power in school contexts and the desire to create change (Camangian, 2010). The development of a critical consciousness is built upon this foundation and works towards a social analysis grounded in theoretical and pedagogical frameworks that position youth and their communities as knowledge-holders with the power to bring about transformation and liberation (Freire, 1970; Makaiiau & Freese, 2013). Pedagogically, this critical consciousness is imperative for teachers and students alike, as the journey towards true learning in the classroom is shared (Makaiiau & Freese, 2013). It also builds towards classroom practices rooted in the belief that all students exhibit cultural assets that are essential to their academic success and community connectedness. In these ways, cultural assets are not static, individualistic possessions, but rather they are fluid, shared experiences that must be harnessed as a part of collective classroom learning.

Together, these three attributes—positionality, critical consciousness, and harnessing cultural assets—are foundations and goals of the teacher education program that interviewees in this study participated in. They are certainly complex and contested issues in teaching (Ayers & Ayers, 2014), but they are tenets that we feel help us to confront the current attacks on teacher education and work towards a vision for teaching as an act of social justice.

## Envisioning Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a) describes *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP) as “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). CRP plays a role in countering the deficit narratives tied to historically marginalized students of Color, as teachers enacting CRP utilize student culture as a valuable tool for learning instead of positioning culture as an explanation for student failure (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). CRP also counters simplistic versions of multicultural education in which students are limited to learning about people of Color through *heroes and holidays* (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2006). Multicultural education via *heroes and holidays* marginalizes legacies of people of Color to a few themed lessons or celebrations throughout the school year. In contrast, CRP works to position students’ cultural identities at the center of their learning every day.

As educational researchers continue to investigate examples of CRP enacted in classrooms, findings indicate that many teachers continue to engage with simplistic and static notions of culture (Irizarry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). While teachers may use cultural examples within their curriculum, without considering how authentically relevant their examples may be for students, they often fall back into the trap of simplistic multicultural education that essentializes students’ cultural identities and perspectives (Irizarry, 2007). Consequently, the perceived notions that teachers hold about their students’ cultures become subjects to study rather than students’ true lived experiences. Therefore, students of Color remain marginalized and they do not gain critical perspectives in their learning and in their classrooms.

Researchers have also studied ways that teachers enact CRP and avoid cultural essentialism, reflecting the three tenets of teaching for social justice mentioned previously: addressing positionality, fostering critical consciousness, and harnessing cultural assets (Kohli, 2012; Martinez, 2010). Teachers enacting aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy attempt to engage in continual critical self-reflection regarding their practice and how their positionality plays a role in their teaching, as Duncan-Andrade (2007) found through studying successful urban educators committed to social justice (Latta & Olafson, 2006). Research also suggests that teachers can work towards impactful CRP by actively seeking to learn more about their students’ and schools’ surrounding communities in order to understand their students more deeply and effectively utilize cultural assets in their classrooms (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Irizarry, 2007; Phuntsog, 1999). As teachers strive to understand and utilize their students’ cultural assets in their classrooms, they can develop students’ critical consciousness to become agents of change in their own communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Picower, 2012). Teachers consistently pushing themselves to authentically understand their students can result in evolving practices that continually reflects their students’ lived experiences (Camangian, 2010; Makaiau & Freese, 2013).

## Methods

### Participants and Data Collection

Data collection for this study included focus group interviews with a group of 13 pre- and in-service teachers who were either completing their final semester in a dual master’s/credential program or completing their first year of teaching in a public school. Interviewees were part of a

larger study of new teachers transitioning from the university to the K-12 classroom, and all were completing or recently completed a teacher education program at a private university in California with a stated focus on social justice (Borrero et al., 2016). Interviewees were teaching at 10 different public schools in a range of grade levels (from K-12) and content areas. Of those interviewed, one self-identified as queer, nine were female, and three were male (average age was 26). Further, two identified as mixed race, four as Latino/a, three as Filipino/a, three as White, and one as Chinese-American.

In a deliberate attempt to work as a research team and promote our foundational approach to new teachers as scholars (e.g. Kincheloe, 2008), each aspect of this project was developed collaboratively. Regarding data collection, four different focus group sessions were conducted by a research team consisting of one faculty member and two research assistants enrolled in the previously described teacher education program—one research assistant was completing student teaching and the other was completing her first year of teaching. Methodologically, our goal was to facilitate discussions among new teachers as a way to gain insight into their perspectives of CRP and larger issues of educational equity in our public school system (Luker, 2010). Focus groups were conducted at the university and lasted for approximately ninety minutes. As a research team, we developed the focus group questions through a literature review of pertinent research on CRP (e.g. Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Gay, 2000; Herrera, 2010; Irizarry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 2014; Martinez, 2010; Nieto, 2013; Paris, 2012; Picower, 2012), discussions as a group about our own experiences as students and teachers, and a pilot conversation with colleagues who were beginning their student teaching. Through this process, the focus group protocol centered on the following questions:

- What does culturally relevant pedagogy mean to you?
- What does culturally irrelevant pedagogy mean to you?
- What are the consequences of culturally relevant pedagogy?
- What has helped you develop culturally relevant pedagogy?
- What are challenges to culturally relevant pedagogy?
- What is working for you as a new teacher?

Focus group discussions were audio taped and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

Using foundations of case study research, focus group transcripts were analyzed by the three authors. Each of us read the transcripts independently before coding began (Merriam, 1988). Following this initial reading, we each re-read the transcripts independently and began to underline recurring units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Based on these underlined words and phrases, each of us started to generate categories within which these units fit (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We used this approach to generate as many codes as possible.

As a group, we then met to discuss the codes that we had identified. We shared codes and began to discuss possible themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that spoke to the experiences of these new teachers in local schools. Following this meeting, we independently re-read transcripts and wrote down possible themes. For each theme, we identified key quotes from participants. We then met again, shared our themes and quotes, and discussed possible overlap and consolidation of themes. As a group we reached consensus on the themes presented below. As per this coding

procedure (Glesne, 1999), quotes are presented to display the nature of a given theme, not to necessarily represent sentiments of the entire sample.

### **Positionality**

As a team, we are committed to research that showcases the voices of classroom teachers (e.g. Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Kohli, 2009). With extensive experience working among youth, we—one teacher educator (as well as former middle and high school teacher) and two graduate students (former after school program instructors and current master’s/credential candidates)—acknowledge our goals and associated biases towards cultural relevance and the need to disrupt the socially reproductive foundations of schooling that silence marginalized students. This study is grounded in our belief that teachers’ voices must be central to the empirical inquiry of meaningful teaching in urban schools, with our collective experiences and varied perspectives providing strengths and weaknesses to our approach and analysis. The deliberacy with which we pursue teachers’ perspectives on CRP is central to this work and impacts the findings presented below. As scholars of Color, we feel it is imperative to address issues of power, race, class, and gender in teaching and in research. Therefore, we feel that our positionality is an important facet of this work—not just because we are actively seeking to portray the voices of new teachers who are part of a movement for institutional changes in our educational system, but because we recognize our own complicity in the system and the need for us as teachers and scholars to stand in opposition to the narrative that blames students, families, and teachers for academic failure.

### **Findings**

The themes below highlight participants’ perceptions of cultural relevance, and more specifically, the ways that these new teachers worked to enact CRP at their school sites. Through reflection and dialogue, this group of new teachers identified multiple dimensions of CRP and discussed necessary prerequisites for stimulating critical consciousness with their students. These educators also addressed teacher positionality and the challenges they often faced when attempting to enact CRP in the classroom. The themes—*challenging monolithic views of cultural relevance; authentically centering students’ lived experiences; cultivating an environment for CRP; reflexive teaching mentalities and practices; and addressing barriers when enacting CRP*—are explored below with representative quotes.

#### **Challenging Monolithic Views of Cultural Relevance**

Interviewees problematized hegemonic ideas that lead people to misinterpret the three tenets of Ladson-Billings’ (1995b) original definition of CRP: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. They challenged static notions of culture, academic success, and critical thinking skills, as discussed in the following subthemes: *multiple perspectives and identities, CRP as a tool for social justice, and counter and dominant narratives*.

#### ***Multiple Perspectives and Identities***

Interviewees expressed that “culture” is often thought of as essentialized notions of race and ethnicity. For example, Conlan stated: “A lot of folks within teaching, when they hear

culturally relevant pedagogy, they think it means, ‘Oh, you have to teach Toni Morrison to African American students or Sandra Cisneros to Latino students.’” Turning to more critical perspectives on culture, interviewees shared their consideration of multiple perspectives and intersectionalities in order to avoid essentializing students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds. Kirsten stated that she discusses multiple perspectives of what it means to be black with her black students:

Students see me representing intersecting identities as opposed to just blanket identities... We don’t just spend a lot of time reading the same black stories... We learn about different perspectives, like different ways of being within the black community that kind of break up what it means to be black in the first place.

Participants also said that people tend to think of one’s culture only as one’s race or ethnic background. Casey said, “Initially I got so stuck in the idea of culture and culturally relevant as being...ethnicity and family history or race.” She continued with sharing how limiting culture to blanket racial or ethnic experiences discounts “the kind of culture that [students] have created in their own [lives].” Interviewees felt that teachers need to recognize the fluid, active nature of culture so they can reach students who inhabit a multitude of identities, rather than essentializing students and their cultures (e.g. *heroes and holidays* curriculum).

### ***CRP as a Tool for Social Justice***

This group of new teachers countered hegemonic notions of academic success that often equate to assimilation into the dominant culture. Conlan stated, “I think that most folks think that justice is working class and/or young people of Color assimilating into the dominant culture and getting to go to college.” He continued by sharing the goals that he has for students to achieve in his class, which counter notions of assimilation:

[Identify] systems that are literally set up to ensure that there are groups of people who have to do the work that nobody wants to do, or set up to become incarcerated and enslaved in the prison industrial complex, or you’re literally targeted for destruction in different forms of what I think are continued forms of genocide.

Kirsten shared that she enacts CRP in order for her students to achieve academic success in the sense of critical thinking skills that are useful beyond the classroom: “We actually want to train them to be intellectual for themselves and their community as opposed to being intellectual to serve white supremacist capitalism.” In a time when students’ critical thinking skills are supposedly quantified by standardized testing, these new teachers felt that their fellow educators should intentionally identify for what and whose purposes they foster students’ critical thinking skills.

### ***Counter and Dominant Narratives***

Participants discussed learning both counter and dominant narratives as an important dimension of effective CRP. Madison stated: “most of the textbooks and things being used in the classroom have that dominant narrative—white man’s story—and they leave out all other histories that were involved in an incident.” Although participants expressed that CRP indeed includes

counter narratives, they expressed including dominant narratives as well. Madison continued: “We want to also teach our students to critically analyze, and how can they critically analyze if they are not given all parts of the story?” Casey built upon Madison’s sentiment about counter and dominant narratives, stating that CRP isn’t solely teaching counter narratives, but teaching all narratives in a way that becomes relevant to their students:

I’ve come to realize that there really isn’t an irrelevant curriculum; I don’t think that binary exists. I believe in...making something connected or contextualizing in a way that students can connect to, but I feel like even the dominant narrative is part of a wider story, and it’s something that students need to hear.

### **Authentically Centering Students’ Lived Experiences**

As interviewees problematized hegemonic notions of cultural relevance, they discussed cultural relevancy via authentically centering students and their experiences in the classroom. Interviewees discussed several ways that they ensure their curriculum reflects their students’ lived experiences as authentically as possible. The three sub themes that emerged are *student assets*, *culture as a lived and changing experience*, and *truly knowing students*.

#### ***Student Assets***

Participants expressed that a major step towards authentically centering students in classrooms and curriculum is to view their backgrounds as assets. Abbey said:

It means...grounding your teaching in what [students] bring to the table and the assets and experiences that they bring, so that [curriculum] is relevant to their lives and they have some relationship with the knowledge and it is meaningful to them. I think it’s also respecting them and who they are and not imposing your own thinking.

Participants felt that teachers *must* believe that what students carry with them into the classroom are assets in order to have respect for their students. If teachers do not respect their students and the positions they occupy, they cannot develop content that truly connects with students, and as Abbey said, teachers will inevitably end up simply “imposing [their] own thinking.”

#### ***Culture as a Lived and Changing Experience***

As discussed above, interviewees challenged essentialized ideas about race and ethnicity as well as the notion of culture as static. In order for teachers to authentically reflect students in their curriculum, they must acknowledge the ways that they actively shape and modify their cultures, as stated by Mariel:

We have the agency to change the culture, to transform it into our own. The culture that was learned in history’s past is still relevant to [us] now because it forms our identity, but it’s not the only culture we are allowed to take part in. We have the right to transform that culture.



With immigration and racial mixing in major cities and metropolitans across the US, students are constantly renegotiating their cultural identities and creating hybrid identities (Irizarry, 2007). These new teachers noted that when teachers become stuck in essentialized notions of race and ethnicity, they do not see the ways that students experience and shape their own cultures.

### ***Truly Knowing Students***

Interviewees expressed that when teachers do not truly know their students and their interests, they risk making assumptions about what will engage their students. Casey said:

I think it's a lot about assumptions... Because students look a certain way, [teachers assume] that they will have a certain experience, or interest in certain things. Like, "that's a black student, he must love hip hop. Let's talk about hip hop."

When teachers assume who their students are based on essentialized notions of their perceived identities, their curriculum may not be authentic to their students' experiences and therefore disengaging. Mariel said:

If what you're teaching is not useful or applicable, or students can't connect to that experience [because] it's not their own experience, it's not relevant... They are not going to engage in something they don't see themselves a part of.

Instead, Casey suggested that teachers should get to know their students personally so they can understand and bring in students' true experiences and interests into the classroom: e.g. relationships, friendships, family dynamics, music, and TV.

### **Cultivating an Environment for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Many of the educators who were interviewed understood the significance of cultivating an environment conducive to critical consciousness. Interviewees expressed that CRP is not a type of pedagogy that could be turned on and off, but rather a discourse which required careful classroom planning and an open-minded mentality. Four subthemes describe the type of environment that the interviewees intentionally crafted to support authentic CRP: *community building*, *openness to student challenges*, *flexibility*, and *risk of not knowing the answer*.

#### ***Building Community***

Trust and mutual respect were recognized as central components of a classroom practicing authentic CRP. Interviewees hoped that early community building would allow students to humanize each other and grow together, instead of harboring feelings of distrust, inferiority, or superiority when engaged in critical discussion. Erin recognized this need for student cohesiveness and understanding, investing energy at the start of the school year to ensure that "everyone has a voice and everyone feels valued." She achieved these objectives by "[creating] classroom norms together" where students understood that "everyone has their own opinions and everyone is valued."

### ***Openness to Student Challenges***

In addition to motivating students to trust each other, our participants conducted themselves in a manner that would amplify trust between the students and the teacher. Although teachers hold virtually all authority within traditional classroom dynamics, these educators discussed attempts to move away from teacher-centered pedagogy and had unique interactions with their students. For instance, Conlan allowed his students to challenge him directly. He remarked that “more often than not, it develops a sense of trust with my students.” He stated that he tries to give students a substantial voice in his classroom, demonstrating that student opinion resonates not only among classmates, but with the teacher as well.

Allowing students to challenge a teacher’s authority may allow for greater success when transitioning to new concepts or practices, like those of CRP, in the classroom. Students may be completely unfamiliar with CRP if they have been going through traditional schooling for years, and with this unfamiliarity may come confusion, disengagement or refusal to participate. Conlan noted that allowing students to challenge him the classroom made them “more willing to be engaged and give things a try if they might not initially.” Having this type of mindset may be unsettling to many educators, but Conlan’s account illustrates how it could benefit those striving to engage students in critical consciousness.

### ***Flexibility***

Interviewees agreed that engaging students with culturally relevant material must put the student at the center of the discussion, not the expectations or assumptions of the teacher. Because it is difficult to map out factors like discussion outcomes or student opinion beforehand, student-centered lesson plans may not follow the direction teachers initially intended. The class may veer off toward something entirely different from what was expected. In these scenarios, Casey commented on how important it is for an educator to be flexible: “If something is not going in the direction that you necessarily wanted it to go but there’s meaningful, engaged discussion with students...be flexible enough to go with that and learn from that.”

Casey emphasized the importance of engagement and meaning, instead of intended outcomes, to a classroom practicing authentic CRP. She also highlighted how this type of situation can be turned into a valuable learning opportunity for the teacher, who can continue to hone their practice by following the students’ lead.

### ***Risk of not Knowing the Answer***

CRP requires teachers to move away from absolute certainty, as student-centered pedagogy depends heavily on current student input rather than a teacher’s prior knowledge. Though educators traditionally plan lessons for which they have the right answers, our participants noted how teachers enacting CRP may not hold all the answers when engaging in critical dialogue with their students. They must accept this risk as an educator. Mariel stated how “it’s about asking questions and never assuming you know the answer that the students are going to answer [with].” Although teachers usually seek and provide correct responses, educators would benefit by posing questions that may not have an “answer.”

## Reflexive Teaching Mentalities and Practices

Though CRP is student-centered pedagogy, these new educators talked about the fact that it is critical for teachers to continually reflect on themselves and their practice. Interviewees discussed what it means to be an educator enacting CRP in the following subthemes: *self-reflection*, *teacher positionality*, and *teaching as a process*.

### *Self-reflection*

Our participants recognized self-reflection as one of the most essential practices for an educator, especially for those attempting to enact CRP. Constant awareness and contemplation of oneself, one's classroom, and one's objectives were attributes which many felt were indispensable. Abbey explained that "the process of self-reflection and trying to figure out where you want to be and how you're going to get there...was really important, necessary, and hard." She also understood the importance of identifying "what sort of prejudices or ideas you hold" in the capacity of an educator. Abbey's comments highlight the role of self-reflection as a tool for professional development, providing a mechanism to regularly assess short-term and long-term objectives as a teacher. It also lends itself as a useful tool to analyze oneself as an individual, recognizing personal convictions and areas for improvement.

### *Teacher Positionality*

Many aspects of an educator's background characterize strengths that every classroom should have: professional training, expertise, compassion, and so on. But with these strengths come potentially damaging expectations, assumptions, and biases that should be identified and addressed through self-reflection. Interviewees, like Vivien, recognized the significance of "knowing your own position in the classroom." She expanded on that sentiment, describing how any educator must reflect on "who you are, where you're coming from, and what you're bringing into the classroom." Her comments highlight the importance of teacher positionality; if we as educators want students to undertake journeys of self-discovery and reflection, we must understand our own unique characteristics and undergo a similar journey ourselves.

Examining teacher positionality in a classroom necessitates an examination of teachers within the American education system. Broadly speaking, educators exist within an institution that reproduces inequality (Duncan-Andrade, 2007). This is reflected in the disparity between the types of schools serving high-income, predominantly White communities and those serving low-income communities—predominantly comprised of people of Color (e.g. Kincheloe, 2008; Kumashiro, 2012). Interviewees noted how acknowledging one's role in such an institution can be helpful. One educator, Conlan, remarked: "I unfortunately have to be the face that's connected to this historically oppressive institution that has generally been used to create and reproduce a stratified society." As Conlan stated, teachers work as employees for a hegemonic establishment, directly connecting educators to a force of oppression in the lives of many students. This is an essential aspect of teacher positionality that cannot be ignored, as one of the central tenets of CRP is to identify and name the systems of oppression operating around us.

### ***Teaching as a Process***

Although self-reflection is a tool allowing teachers to reflect upon their practice, positionality, and role in the classroom, interviewees understood that this reflection is never complete. Self-reflection is a way of being. Participants also conveyed a similar notion when discussing teaching as a whole—there is no point of completion or complete mastery. Conlan summarized this notion as one of “always becoming.” An educator always seeks to improve their practice without an end in sight, pledging to enact culturally relevant pedagogy through continuous commitment and action.

### **Addressing Barriers when Enacting Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Teaching is challenging for everyone, and those teaching with the hope of employing authentic CRP encounter additional difficulties. The educators who were interviewed spoke about scenarios which were especially frustrating. Though these barriers may have been broad, interviewees also suggested ways to support the implementation of CRP in the classroom. The discussion encompassed two subthemes: *space to collaborate in light of administrative demands* and *mentors and models to observe in spite of lacking resources*.

#### ***Space to Collaborate in Light of Administrative Demands***

Because school districts require certain amounts of testing and adherence to specific standards, many teachers find that their time is consumed by the demands of the administration. Our teachers talked about the fact that they have less time at their discretion to practice pedagogies like CRP. Erin related how she felt frustrated at the fact that she had “all these benchmarks and assessments and all these things that you gotta do aside from all the things you want to put in.” As is the case with many educators, administrative requirements must be balanced with the desire to stimulate critical consciousness among students.

Participants identified collaboration as a means to counteract the pressures from school administration. Lacking a peer network or support system would make it additionally challenging to balance school requirements and CRP ideals. Madison remarked on how she felt many teachers felt alone, stating that “teaching in general can be a very isolating job.” In Madison’s opinion, “having the space to speak with colleagues or peers about different ideas has been really helpful.” This sentiment was echoed by several interviewees, highlighting the positive effect that collaboration can have among teachers struggling to enact CRP under constant administrative pressure.

#### ***Mentors and Models to Observe in Spite of Lacking Resources***

Since many school districts follow standardized curricula, they do not provide material that would directly support teachers attempting authentic CRP instead of approaches like *heroes and holidays* multiculturalism. Often times, educators find that very little to no curriculum exists as a reference. Casey discussed this challenge in the classroom, stating that “it’s really hard unless you have a model or you have curriculum that has been done.” Because she does not have viable models, Casey disclosed how “[she has] to create everything.” In an environment that demands for teachers to divert their time and energy towards administrative requirements, teachers wanting to utilize CRP may be discouraged by the lack of resources.

Several participants struggling with this challenge identified mentors as a means to overcome the scarcity of resources and references. Though mentors may not have ready-made curriculum, they could serve as models for educators to observe and emulate. One teacher, Kirsten, commented on how fortunate she felt with her mentor-teachers. She said, “I feel like I’ve had a lot of good examples that have helped me have relatively good judgment around CRP and how to enact it.” Because authentic CRP must be specific to the students in a certain classroom and cannot rely on the characteristics of another classroom, mentors who model examples of CRP may be one of the most accessible avenues of inspiration.

## **Discussion**

Our participants lend insight to the mentalities, practices, and challenges enacted and encountered among new teachers working to implement what they saw to be authentic CRP in the classroom. Most of these new teachers agreed that interpretations of “cultural relevance” at their school sites were static, as culture was often considered solely a racial or ethnic descriptor. These general notions did not critically analyze the oppressive structures operating in society and failed to account for the multi-dimensionality of culture (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Camangian, 2012).

These educators worked to incorporate critical conversations into their practice by utilizing pedagogy highlighting the unique student assets already present in the classroom (Kohli, 2012; Lenski et al., 2005). They worked to consciously develop classroom environments that provided spaces for all student voices to be valued, moving away from traditional teaching methods. Participants emphasized how authentic CRP required frequent self-reflection as an educator and described the potential of collaboration and mentorship in overcoming various barriers.

These teachers’ voices reveal the complexities and challenges of teaching in today’s classrooms in contexts that are hyper-focused on testing. Not only are these new teachers feeling the pressure to deliver content so students can pass tests (Ayers & Ayers, 2014; Bartolome, 1994), but they are navigating the spaces in between theory and practice (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Kincheloe, 2008). It is key that they occupy these spaces as new teachers entering public schools because they are often the most connected to pedagogical theory in relation to their faculty colleagues. Further, they are often the teachers most closely aligned with youth and their cultural contexts, so their ability to bring a critical social analysis into classrooms heightens their potential to disrupt the cultural irrelevance associated with standardized testing and scripted curriculum (Kohli, 2012; Spring, 2004). In these ways, the voices of this group of new teachers represent possibilities for countering the blame and rhetorical attack on teachers and teaching in the current system (e.g. Kumashiro, 2012).

Through exploring their own and their students’ identities as central aspects of their teaching, these teachers reveal the importance of positionality in their pedagogy (Phuntsog, 1999; Yosso, 2005). Their quotes not only show that these teachers are willing to interrogate their own biases and assumptions, but they are attempting to do so in a way that models authenticity for their students (Camangian, 2013). Their ability to “be real” with their students comes from a true desire to build meaningful relationships with them, and this comes from a continual and purposeful self exploration (Lenski et al., 2005). Again, these interviewees’ positionality as new teachers is crucial here, as they reflect on the process of teacher education and becoming a teacher as central to their abilities to connect with students (Kohli, 2012). It is from this foundation of positionality and the

fluid process of becoming a teacher that this group discusses possibilities for enacting effective CRP.

These teachers also envision possibilities for effective and authentic CRP where teachers understand their students on a deeply nuanced level by moving away from static notions of culture. As these new teachers examine intersectional, hybrid, and multiple identities with their students, they endeavor to allow students to define themselves rather than imposing their assumptions onto students (e.g. Nieto, 2013). Teachers from this study also suggest that academic success and critical thinking skills/consciousness—tenets of Ladson-Billings' (1995a) conceptualizations of CRP—means gaining skills to move through this world as intellectuals who transform society and work towards justice (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). They have observed teachers defining academic success and critical thinking synonymously with assimilation and test-taking skills. Justice-oriented teachers must enact liberatory definitions of “academic success” and “critical thinking” with their students in order to avoid furthering educational inequity.

### **Implications**

This study has limitations that are important to note. First, this study has a small sample of teachers who were all in the same teacher education program. This means that these teachers worked closely together and developed a common—and therefore possibly narrow—understanding of CRP. Thus, these findings are certainly not generalizable to all pre-service teachers and even other new teachers committed to issues of social justice. Second, these teachers have limited experience in classrooms. Several of these new teachers revealed in their interviews that they are still seeking/finding their voices in their classrooms, practicing their liberatory education despite administrative pressure to focus on improving test scores, and figuring out how they can bring their theory and pedagogy alive in their practice. As these new teachers navigate complex education systems, their visions for CRP are still very much in the preliminary stages. We know that teaching is highly contextual, and thus, we acknowledge that these findings may be unique to this group. Further, these findings are in no way intended to portray these participants or this teacher education program as having definitive solutions to the current attack on teachers or the deficit narrative facing urban students. Rather, we present these new teachers' voices to showcase a context in which new members of the profession are engaging in conceptual and pedagogical inquiry into the challenges of CRP and its implementation in the classroom. We also acknowledge that this research is exploratory and incipient. Further studies in this area should investigate K-12 students' and families' perspectives of CRP and its potential impact on learning.

We also feel that the contextual factors this study highlights—the relationships among this group of teachers and their newness to the profession—offer unique strengths. As stated at the outset, the new and fresh ideas of these folks make the possibility for change in our educational system exciting. Further, their commitment to developing pedagogies that address issues of equity is central to the investigation of cultural relevance as a foundation of teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Kohli, 2009, 2012). In many ways, it is the fact that these new teachers acknowledge these preliminary stages of CRP as a part of their growth—or certainly as a part of their process towards becoming the teachers they want to be—that makes this research important for the larger pursuit of educational equity in our public schooling system (Luker, 2010). It is the candor of their self-reflection and their willingness to implicate themselves in a larger movement towards cultural relevance that makes their voices powerful.

This study started with the premise that teachers' voices are missing in the national discourse about educational success. As educational researchers, we are complicit in this silencing of teachers if we do not actively seek opportunities for them to speak to the strengths and challenges of their contexts and their visions for change (Kincheloe, 2008). The voices of these new teachers reveal some of the intricacies of what it can be like to embark on a career with a desire to teach for justice. Their quotes show that concepts like diversity and multiculturalism represent contested spaces in many of our public schools and that some teachers, perhaps with the best of intentions, are further replicating inequities between students through simplified and monolithic understandings of what it means to teach for equity (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Linsky et al., 2005; Picower, 2012). These teachers' desire to build CRP in new and different ways from what they see happening is a key finding of this study and one that calls for future research. As an inquiry into the importance of teacher education, these teachers' voices represent a starting point—a place for us as educators to think about what CRP means in today's schools and what we want it to look like moving forward.

The perspective of these new teachers also encourages us to consider the significance of solidarity and mentorship within teacher education. Among the myriad of challenges educators face in schools today, the teachers from our study emphasized the challenge of coping with administrative pressure and functioning without appropriate resources. However, they suggested that working with other individuals through collaboration or mentorship would be feasible ways of addressing their issues. The answer to their most pressing needs was a call to solidarity, embodied in the interpersonal relationships derived from a supportive network of peers and mentors. This is something that we must model and build into our practice and programming as teacher educators. The reflective responses of these teachers not only provide us with insight to their experiences, but also convey a powerful message of how camaraderie among teachers is a cornerstone of implementing critical analysis and critique into one's classroom.

These new teachers showcase a passion and vision for teaching that is inspiring. They offer hope in an educational arena that continues to focus on what students can't do and why teachers are to blame (Ayers & Ayers, 2014; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Kumashiro, 2012). This hope comes from the fact that these teachers (and others like them) are entering public school classrooms in greater numbers and are spending significant amounts of time with our youth daily. It is these new, and critically conscious, teachers who must determine what CRP is and what it needs to become. The very nature of culture is one of fluidity and change—it is something that we learn and therefore can teach (Nieto, 2002). For these reasons, as teacher educators, we must work alongside our new teachers and have them teach us ways to envision programs and produce scholarship that can show the changes that CRP can undergo and the impact it can have on teaching and learning.

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**Noah Borrero** is Associate Professor of Teacher Education at the University of San Francisco (USF). As a part of his work with the Master's program in Urban Education and Social Justice at USF he teaches courses in bilingual education, critical pedagogy, and action research.

**Asra Ziauddin** is currently a social studies teacher at the Jefferson Union High School District in the Bay Area. She teaches course in US and World History to 10th and 11th graders.

**Alexandra Ahn** is a middle school Humanities teacher in Richmond, CA. She has previously worked in public schools and youth development programs in Oakland and San Francisco since 2011.