The Function of Freedom:

Practitioner Action Research in Emancipatory Social Justice Teacher Education

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Like other critical scholars working toward transformative social justice, aligning my means and ends has been an imperative underlying the work I do, both in and beyond the classroom (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Picower, 2012; Rosenthal, 2000). Many teacher education programs are also now explicitly placing education for social justice as a central component to their missions (Hytten & Bettez, 2011), and the program at the urban Midwestern university where I began the work discussed in this chapter similarly emphasizes preparing educators to enable diverse learners in urban classrooms, who remain underserved despite decades of educational reform (Au, 2009; Donnor, 2013; Saltman, 2012; Stovall, 2013).

To support these aims, I conducted practitioner action research on my use and modeling of a pedagogical framework, known as critically compassionate intellectualism (CCI) (Cammarota & Romero, 2006a), in an educational foundations course. CCI was cultivated through several programs implemented for Latinx youth in Arizona high schools (Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009). These social justice-oriented programs were meant to counter injustices that Latinx and other racial/ethnic minority students face in our education system, particularly exemplified in the low-tracked, vocation-focused, and generally non-critical educational experiences provided to the majority of these youth (Cammarota & Romero, 2006a; Cammarota & Romero, 2006b; Romero et al., 2009). The original CCI framework centers on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/1993), authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999), and a social justice
curriculum and purpose (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). I have also incorporated relational-cultural theory (Jordan, 1995; Miller & Stiver, 1997) into my extended interpretation of CCI, which draws attention to the relational factors of trust, mutual empathy, authenticity, shared power, and growth-in-connection in teaching and learning (Rector-Aranda, in press). The CCI framework has been shown to be truly emancipatory for Latinx high school students, fostering their critical consciousness in addition to greater academic achievement and life competencies.

In this chapter, I give an overview of my study and specifically discuss how, as a practitioner-researcher, CCI guided my selection of the action research paradigm and methods that allowed me to retain my stance as an advocate for critical consciousness, care and compassion, and the intellectual pursuit of emancipatory educational and social justice.

**The Function of Freedom is to Free Somebody Else**

In my research and experience, I have found there is quite a difference between the most widely-adopted understandings of social justice education and what could be considered *emancipatory* social justice education. Many of the former are watered-down versions of what began as the ideas and efforts of those most personally affected by injustice. Atasay (2015), for example, problematizes the current emphasis on multicultural education, asserting that it has been commodified to meet neoliberalism’s shallow calls for social justice based solely in a competitive market mentality. This kind of justice only occasions creating educational equality for the ends of raising the earning capacities of students. Here, multiculturalism exists as a means

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1 I borrow the phrase “The function of freedom is to free somebody else” from Toni Morrison (1979) who, in addressing a graduating class of college women, implored them “not to participate in the oppression of your sisters…You are moving in the direction of freedom and the function of freedom is to free somebody else” (p. 42). Rather than use our power to maintain the status quo, teachers, teacher educators, and education researchers are likewise in prime positions to advocate on behalf of those who have been educationally marginalized.

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for students to compete in a global marketplace, rather than to respect differences and alternative visions of the good life that may not rest upon economic goals. This is unsurprising, given the current neoliberal influence on education (Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2013), where social justice is viewed in functional rather than transformative terms.

To counter this trend, I have consciously used CCI as a way to align my practice with the epistemologies and experiences of students of color rather than the superficial ideals of most mainstream initiatives (Castagno, 2014). Honoring the roots of CCI in a project to empower Latinx students, I expanded on the project in order to study how CCI can also support teacher education students, especially those who have traditionally been marginalized in teacher education programs (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2016), as well as serve as a model for those who will one day teach in racially diverse, low-income, or otherwise disenfranchised communities. While some of my students have been more culturally privileged than others, they have all still rarely experienced anything but different varieties of apolitical, banking pedagogy, and have been denied critical and transformative opportunities to create their own knowledge. It is crucial that all future teachers are able to personally understand and name this phenomenon in order to proceed toward a more emancipatory practice in their own classrooms, and CCI offers a physical and visible example for these pre-service teachers to experience and consider as they form their own teaching identities.

In the course of my research, I did consider other existing frameworks for social justice teacher preparation, however, they tended to lack CCI’s strong emphasis on alleviating oppression and empowering students as social actors. I continued to focus on CCI because it is directly rooted in this kind of transformative social justice pedagogy for marginalized youth. When I educate future teachers through CCI, I use curriculum that frames the causes and
purposes of social justice education in necessarily more radical and race-conscious ways than are currently typical in teacher education, especially for a White educator like myself. As critical race and whiteness scholars argue, the typical liberal teacher education program tends toward a universalized and diluted version of what it means to educate for social justice, and who and what it is we are aiming to support in doing so (Castagno, 2014; Matias, 2013). Ignoring that students of color are perpetually the disproportionate recipients of social and educational injustices—especially when their race intersects with other marginalized identities such as gender, ability, or socioeconomic status—negates the anti-racist and transformative goals that should underscore social justice education. Modeling pedagogies like CCI can help prepare teachers who empower their underserved students beyond academic learning or earning capacity with the ability to challenge and overcome the larger social and structural obstacles they face.

**Action Research is Critical, Compassionate, and Intellectual**

Connecting CCI pedagogy to classroom inquiry, I argue that the research we do with or on behalf of students who have been disempowered should also be explicitly compassionate and emancipatory, especially when conducted by practitioner-researchers committed to these ideals. Regarding the privileging of certain ways of being and knowing, Milner notes, “the dominant and oppressive perspective is that White people, their beliefs, experiences, and epistemologies…are often viewed as ‘the norm’ by which others are compared, measured, assessed, and evaluated” (Milner, 2007, p. 389). Instead, I believe the CCI model is more fitting when considering for whom it is we claim to be doing this research, under what assumptions, and to what ends. “The idea is that epistemologies need to be ‘colored’ and that the research community may need to be exposed to theories, perspectives, views, positions, and discourses

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that emerge from the experiences and points of view of people and researchers of color” (p. 390).
As such, CCI was not only the topic of my inquiry, but also the theoretical foundation for all of
my methodological choices.

The foundational principles of action research as a mutually empathic form of inquiry,
wherein the researcher exerts authentic “power with” rather than “power over” participants,
correlates with key tenets of CCI. Action research was the appropriate choice for this study
because, at its core, action research is research done by and with actors and stakeholders in a
setting, rather than to or on them, which is vital to research meant to empower participants (Herr
& Anderson, 2015). “AR promotes broad participation in the research process and supports
action leading to a more just, sustainable, or satisfying situation for the stakeholders”
(Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 3). In addition to being a researcher, I was a participant and
stakeholder along with my students, which is significant considering educational research is
predominantly conducted by outside researchers, and teachers and students have little or no
influence on the process or its implications for their work.

Action research was a means to effect immediate change for myself as a practitioner, for
the student participants, and to help disrupt mainstream epistemological assumptions of what
counts as research in the first place (Kincheloe, 2008). As educational action research, this work
centered on “altering curriculum, challenging common school practices, and working for social
change by engaging in a continuous process of problem posing, data gathering, analysis, and
action” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 40). This was also practitioner action research, which
is a systematic inquiry into personal practice marked by the desire to inform or transform
(Adams, 2015) and based in an extended epistemology that recognizes experiential,
presentational, propositional, and practical ways of knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997). Four
semesters of this research represented four practitioner action research cycles of action and reflection if viewed broadly, and many micro-cycles throughout each semester, as I navigated students’ implicit and explicit responses and made constant adjustments to my pedagogy and curriculum. Because I also sought the input of the whole community of my classroom, participatory projects with students helped me gain further insight into their varied perspectives.

At the conclusion of the four cycles of course-embedded inquiry was a fifth cycle in which I took the body of qualitative data as a whole and analyzed it through a critical constructivist lens, incorporating a participative worldview that was self-reflexive, based in my own experiential encounters with reality as a practitioner-researcher (Frank, 2013). This part of the project was mainly descriptive, as opposed to interpretive or theory-generating, with the aim to provide evidence about what occurred in relation to the CCI framework—to show and explain the most important ways students and I enacted, experienced, and made sense of the existing framework.

Although it might have been possible to study my question using a different research approach, action research was more fitting than any other, specifically because of its emphasis on immediate reflection, action, and movement toward positive social change for those directly involved in the research. Unlike most other forms of research that are purposely designed to separate out theorizing from action, action research, as its name implies, is unequivocally meant to link interpretation and theorizing to immediate action with and on behalf of the participants. Likewise, while some methods consider relationships between researchers and their participants to cause unacceptable bias, action research sees relationships and their consideration as key elements of any humanizing research process. This focus on the participants as subjects rather than objects aligns well with an emancipatory stance.

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CCI as Both Process and Product

The CCI framework further permeated the process of this study in several specific ways. First, the groundwork—the theory and literature reviews, examination of researcher and participant positionalities, and philosophical justifications for the work—served to situate the project in critical inquiry, considering alternative perspectives, assumptions, ideologies, and other reasons for both enacting CCI and studying it formally within my context. This resulted, for example, in naming and calling into question the mainstream epistemological barriers to transformative pedagogy and research in education; examining the politicality/apoliticality of doing any kind of research; troubling my positionality as a White educator using a “framework of color” (Milner, 2007); and thoughtfully considering the assumptions and aims that drive social justice work generally. These aligned the project with the critical and intellectual aims of CCI, but also with the care element, since underlying this extensive groundwork was my genuine concern to be a competent ally-advocate for those most marginalized by systemic oppressions.

Next was an overall valuing of contextual and localized knowledge for the primary purpose of direct action and sustainable change with and on behalf of participants and their future students. Action research was itself chosen on the basis of its “radical respect for others’ experiences, openness to being moved and influenced by others, and shared power” (Jordan, 2014, p. 682), as well as “unapologetic ethical and political engagement and its commitment to working with community partners to achieve positive social change” (Brydon-Miller, 2009, p. 243). For example, participatory action research methods like photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) and group-level assessment (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014) ensured students were co-creators of the knowledge being produced. Further, my voice as a practitioner possessing intimate and implicit knowledge of my own students and setting was foregrounded in this study. In the face of
a culture of evidence that demands research be detached and generalizable—in which research is typically conducted on rather than with teachers and students—this emphasis on participant knowledge aligns with CCI as an emancipatory framework. It challenges the status quo in education research, in which teachers and students are treated as transmitters and/or receptacles of someone else’s knowledge, rather than as possessors and creators of knowledge (Freire, 1970/1993).

Finally, the research methods encompassed a relational and reflective ethical orientation, rich, holistic means of evaluation, and transformative aims, which again helped the study adhere to the tenets of CCI. Augmenting traditional, “contractual” research ethics, this project embodied a covenental ethics, which suggests “a solemn and personally compelling commitment to act in the good of others” (Brydon-Miller, 2009, p. 255). Care and relationships were at the heart of procedural decisions, such as forming trusting relationships with students before asking them to participate in the study.2 I also utilized the Structured Ethical Reflection process to align my actions with the CCI values at each phase of the research (Brydon-Miller, Rector Aranda, & Stevens, 2015; Stevens, Brydon-Miller, & Raider-Roth, 2016). I carefully chose methods to address what I consider more socially-engaged measures of quality/reliability, which include process and outcome validity, but also how democratic, catalytic, and dialogic the research was (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). The project was also holistic and action-oriented, addressing the nuanced needs of a specific community/context. Action research is best known for its cyclical, iterative nature, in which a researcher/community identifies a need, plans, acts on that plan, observes, reflects, and makes the next plan based on that reflection, beginning the cycle

2 This study was submitted to my institution’s IRB and exempted from further oversight; however, I chose to ask participants for their written consent.

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again (Hill, 2015). This project was further strengthened in the final cycle using eclectic coding (Saldaña, 2016) and equally “thick” descriptive analysis (Denzin, 1989) of the overall project. This analysis made it possible to better disseminate findings from the earlier cycles, and thereby share evidence that CCI is worth considering in discussions of teacher education for emancipatory social justice.

**New Understandings of CCI Through Practitioner Action Research**

In this study, I examined how my implementation of CCI influenced my policies, practices, and pedagogy, and what this meant for students’ learning and other experiences in the course. I have elsewhere described these findings in more depth (Rector-Aranda, forthcoming). A breakthrough for this project that is particularly relevant for this discussion concerned my understanding of the CCI framework itself. While I always believed the three parts of CCI were equally necessary, working together to create the contexts for meaningful learning toward emancipatory social justice ideals for my teacher education students, I did not previously realize how much they were actually *intertwined*, not just working side-by-side. I believed that critical competence was necessary for students to be able to assess content and topics of importance, that relationships and care were crucial for supporting students in their learning and growth, and that curriculum that was not specifically geared toward structural understandings of inequity and social justice had the potential to instead reinforce deficit ideologies and perpetuate injustice. However, I did not fully realize the complex interactions occurring among the CCI components.

**Critical Pedagogy**

First, care and compassion are necessary in an authentically-critical pedagogy in order to challenge and offer alternatives to the chronic relational disconnections that are often unquestioned in educational culture. For example, expressing vulnerability, sharing power with...
students, and trusting and respecting students as inherently-knowing beings are all ways to
 disrupt educational contexts of disconnection that mimic the defensive, hierarchical, and
 interactive forms of disconnection rampant in the larger culture. Critical pedagogy would
 especially associate these persistent forms of disconnection with an individualistic, capitalist
 culture, in which such disconnection is necessary to reproduce divisions of labor and hierarchies
 of power, knowledge, and privilege.

 Critical pedagogy is also as much about social justice curriculum as it is about practice;
 therefore, content must be purposefully selected that will help students deeply examine the
 structures that perpetuate dominance and oppression and spur them to act. For example, it is
difficult to expect students to become energized about educational inequity when using an
 uninspiring textbook that only superficially discusses important social justice topics, if it does at
 all. It is also imperative that critical pedagogues pay close attention to whether certain readings
 may actually “turn off” their undergraduate students, which is a common reproach of critical
 academics who too often write from a privileged intellectual position using language inaccessible
 to the less educated and working-class—the very people whom they claim to champion. In
 addition to more approachable readings, using students’ own cultures and familiar ways of
 knowing to teach new content are at the heart of critical pedagogy, thus helping them connect
 new knowledge with their lived experiences. Modern students live immersed in multiple media
 forms; therefore, the critical pedagogue should equally use art and media to share important
 content, which has the added benefit of supporting diverse learners who may better construct
 knowledge through visual or audial modes.

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Care and Compassion

Next, relational connection and support create a safe space in which students may more confidently question taken-for-granted knowledge, trust their own ability to create new knowledge, and become comfortable with discomfort as they critically examine their own positionalities of power, privilege, and vulnerability. For example, when teacher-student and/or student-student relationships are established within a context of care and trust, students feel safer voicing their ideas, experiences, and understandings in the discussions, written reflections, and collaborative activities that make up a critical pedagogy.

Care and compassion also make it easier for students to work through the unsettling information they encounter in a social justice curriculum. Through relational perspective-taking, they are more easily able to examine and have empathy for the experiences of others, and less likely to get defensive when new concepts disrupt their existing worldviews. In a context that acknowledges the relational connections in our shared experience, criticality becomes an essential aspect of caring about someone or something larger than ourselves. When students are able to take curriculum further by applying it in real settings, such as when deconstructing course practice together or through field experiences, they may also be better able to attach relational emotions to what were previously disembodied concepts. Relational care therefore supports students’ learning of social justice content that can prepare them to act with greater empathy and compassion for their own students.

Social Justice Curriculum

Alleviating oppression for those most marginalized by existing systems requires not only a curriculum that explores evidence of structural injustices; it also means a pedagogy and curriculum that helps students understand how relational disconnection and uncritical acceptance
of structural limitations create the contexts for such injustice to thrive. For example, it is
expected that a social justice curriculum will explore topics such as unequal school funding or
the disproportionate impacts of high-stakes testing reforms on students of color and their schools
(Au, 2009). It is less common to examine how, in some schools focused on raising test scores,
underserved students’ behavior is strictly modified to the point that they are conditioned not to
speak unless spoken to (Ben-Porath, 2013), which inhibits their abilities to socialize and form
supportive peer and teacher-student relationships. It is also unlikely that the usual curriculum
would study why Latinx students feel uncared for in their “subtractive” educational experiences
(Valenzuela, 1999), or how students of color are disproportionally more likely to receive
exclusionary discipline (Office for Civil Rights, 2016), removing them from problem situations
rather than teaching them to work through these situations in relationship with others. When
teacher education students can compare these forms of relational exclusion and disconnection
with their own experiences in higher-achieving schools—where many of my own students report
enjoying many more social freedoms, feeling cared for by their teachers, and having more
opportunity to safely express themselves—this becomes a relational-cultural social justice
curriculum.

Similarly, not all social justice curriculums foreground questioning and challenging
dominant norms as does a critical pedagogy curriculum, which illustrates another unique and
transformative overlap accomplished through CCI. For example, in this curriculum, students read
articles that argue against traditional grading, are asked to consider alternative explanations for
“problem” student behaviors, watch a film in which students and teachers take to the streets to
protest unjust education policies, and are even invited to challenge their instructors and request
alternative curriculum or assignments. These types of content and activities connect knowledge
to action, making dissent and thinking outside the box the new norm. By seeing and experiencing the opposite of complacency, students are better able to understand how complacency can perpetuate injustice. In a less critical social justice curricula, readings center on facts and figures, assignments still come with strict rubrics, and students will automatically lose points for failing to live up to various measures of surveillance. A critical pedagogy curriculum clearly emphasizes personal empowerment and responsibility, remaining constantly critical and reflective, as well as acting on knowledge toward positive social change.

**Catalytic Outcomes of This Educational Action Research**

As previously mentioned, catalytic validity is an important determiner of rigor in an action research inquiry like this one. “All involved in the research should deepen their understanding of the social reality under study and should be moved to some action to change it (or to reaffirm their support of it)” (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 42). Students’ catalytic experiences were evidenced by their expanding comprehension of educational inequity, blossoming trust in their own knowledge, and growing consciousness of their power to act as advocates and agents of change for their students. I also experienced “spiraling changes” in understanding (p. 42), as a practitioner and a researcher, across these several action research cycles. One of the most personally meaningful discoveries in the fifth cycle was that I could trust myself. Like so many neophyte academics, I often suffer from “imposter syndrome,” in which I feel like I am a total fraud and at any minute my students will find out that I have no idea what I am doing or talking about. As a novice instructor with no formal training as a teacher, I often felt not so different from my students who were just beginning their own teacher training. Students, however, repeatedly commented on my expertise and their trust in my knowledge and practices. While I
had previously been aware of these competing perspectives in the data, through the comprehensive analysis, I was finally able to understand the factors that led students to see me as an expert—extensive content knowledge, passion for my subject and for student learning, reflexive adaptation of curriculum and activities, substantial instructive feedback on their assignments, and transparent debriefing of my own actions for their benefit and understanding. I worked very hard to know and do and be all the things they saw me to be, and by deconstructing, examining, relating, and weighing all this evidence, I was able to see it too.

While I have always expended much energy making sure my students trusted themselves and felt themselves capable and their ideas worthwhile, I had neglected to show the same trust, compassion, and respect for myself. I planned to do so, and I thought I tried to do so; yet, looking back, I actually still failed in this regard. Likewise, my stance as a “tempered radical” (Meyerson, 2001), employing what felt like “guerilla” tactics (Ellingson, 2013) under the radar of a larger education system based in surveillance reform, made me feel especially vulnerable and uneasy for most of the time I spent doing this study. The fifth cycle analysis helped counteract the debilitating worry and self-doubt that I confronted as a beginning instructor and helped me see both the strengths and challenges in my teaching. After studying the evidence of my practices and student responses so closely, I now see myself as a knowledgeable and skilled practitioner, in addition to remaining a fallible and constantly learning one, which also strengthens my resolve to continue doing this work.

**Transformative Teacher Education Research**

For all the reasons I have articulated, I believe the methodological considerations in this study have especially upheld my CCI stance and offer important implications for the contemporary field of education research geared toward social justice and change. Responding to

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the culture of evidence in education at large, which, from an anti-oppressive perspective, places
too much emphasis on neutrality, control, quantifiable measurement, and standardization, my
counter-positivist stance sees teaching and research as participatory, political, contextual,
sometimes messy, and always complex. Here, I briefly discuss how my study contributes to one
particular call for research in teacher education that I believe is important when such research is
undertaken with a goal of positive and transformational social change.

In their review of current teacher education research and trends, Cochran-Smith and
Villegas (2015) make recommendations for future research directions that keep up with teacher
quality mandates in education reform, ideas about learning in a knowledge society, and
increasing educational diversity and disparities. In several ways, my project falls within the types
of teacher education research that they say is already prolific—smaller scale, context-specific
studies based in our own settings, and research that examines teacher learning or formation of
attitudes, but is not longitudinal enough to assess their outcomes on their future students’
learning. I agree that there is much future work I might do in these regards.

What is noteworthy here is that Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) also found few
studies that “completely rejected the neoliberal agenda and directly challenged its tenets,” with
the majority of studies instead situated in a sort of middle ground (p. 391). They hold that work
not expressly opposing the neoliberal agenda is “not sufficiently powerful to substantially
challenge the material conditions and social relations that reproduce inequalities and profoundly
influence teaching/learning” (p. 391). By their definition, my study is one of those few that
clearly rejects this agenda, meeting criteria for research that seeks to transform our entire
perspective on why and how we do education research.
By “completely” rejecting and challenging the dominant agenda, we mean studies that assume that teaching and schooling are political, that schools and teachers are complicit in the reproduction of inequalities, and that achieving educational equity would require not simply providing access to educational opportunities but also interrogating how current institutional arrangements and existing social and material relations influence who does and does not have access in the first place. (p. 391)

Research that aligns with such a stance should be open and transparent about this aim, and perhaps part of the reason Cochran-Smith and Villegas did not find more of it is because in the current academic milieu, we are still pressured to tone down or silence our dissenting voices in order to have any chance of forwarding our ideas and objectives for our work (or even making a living).

I know I risk alienating my more temperate colleagues through what could be considered too much transparency with my true feelings and positions on education and research. Like other radical scholars, I believe reining this in can quickly deflate the passion necessary to keep fighting for what we know is good and right. It also privileges certain white, masculine, middle-class ways of knowing and showing knowledge that discount the importance of the emotions we connect to ideas and actions in favor of detached logic and reasoning. In our theoretical orientations as activist scholars, as well as our actual lived experiences, we know that emotion and reason are equally relevant and important to this work. “When we separate our thoughts from our emotions, we retain the capacity to solve logical problems but lose the ability to register experience and navigate the human social world” (Gilligan, 2014, p. 89).

As a tempered radical, I do wish to be heard rather than foreclose important dialogue by turning listeners off to my message before it is shared, but I cannot do this at the expense of my
academic “soul.” Scholars whom I admire do not hide their radical aims and perspectives, but embrace and use them to drive their scholarship, which, not coincidentally, is much more interesting and compelling as a result. I would also venture to point out that many of these scholars are men, for whom it is still more socially acceptable to speak frankly and have strong opinions, and who are more likely to hold onto an audience when they do. In a field that is also still dominated at the higher levels by men while a majority workforce of lower-paid and less powerful women remain at the mercy of these men’s decisions, this is particularly salient. Thankfully, I have had the privilege of learning and working with remarkably strong women scholars who embody a caring, critical, justice orientation throughout their work, giving me hope and the will to keep striving.

**Action and Sustainable Change**

Immediate action and sustainable change for and/or on behalf of those most directly impacted by a project are important requisites for action research. Because this was part of a practitioner inquiry, directly studying my practice and across ongoing cycles of this practice, action was an implicit part of the study. The first four cycles of inquiry embodied a constant spiral of action, reflection, improved action, reflection, and so on in order to continually improve my various content, activities, assignments, policies, and other pedagogy and processes. This action was immediate and sustainable; that is, I frequently implemented changes at the time, those changes contributed to improved practice over time, and this research will continue to influence my future practice, and perhaps other teacher educators’ practice. In the fifth cycle, the

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3 Administrators and others with decision-making capacity are overwhelmingly white, middle- or upper-class, and male (Castagno, 2014; Matias, 2016), another failure of adequate representation for racial minority, low-SES, and other non-privileged students, but also a failure in regards to gender equity, considering that in 2012, 69 percent of the full-time k–12 teaching workforce was female (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2012).

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action I have taken is the dissemination of my findings through publication in hopes of influencing scholarly discussions of what it means to educate teachers for emancipatory social justice. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) convey, “the scholarship of teaching and learning should be public, accessible to critique by others, and exchangeable in the professional community” (p. 40). While this was a study of my practice for the sake of my own improvement and ensuring my students the best possible learning experience, many of my findings may be adaptable and transferable for other teacher educators in their own settings.

For student participants in this study, their participatory projects were a way of taking action toward sustainable change, however, the actual action occurred more on their behalf through my subsequent work than it was actually implemented by them. Certainly, students’ contributions were part of why and how these changes came about and they directly benefitted from the changes (as will my future students); nevertheless, these were still somewhat passive actions on their part. While I believe students left the course more committed to educational justice and supporting all types of learners, and gained important capacities that should help them act more knowledgeably and purposefully in this direction, certain findings suggest that they are still underprepared to actually act as change agents beyond classrooms. A few students retained the stance that teachers should remain neutral when it comes to taking more political forms of action on behalf of their students, and I believe I could have done more or better here, and will use this information to alter my future pedagogy and curriculum to more prominently support students’ ability to enact more public and political forms of activism and teacher dissent. While we did implement changes based on student research and feedback within our course, we did not do enough to take an activist approach beyond our classroom community. The best action research proposes or implements actual solutions, as well as attempts to draw attention from...
administrators and policy makers to the important issues arising from the research. The optimal
time to have done this with students would have been during their photovoice project, however,
because I had so much I was required to cover and barely enough time/energy to cover it with
any depth in the first place, this remained beyond the scope of our work together. I believe there
must be ways to better direct our attention in this outward direction in my future practice with
students.

A further action coming out of this study is documenting how this knowledge can contribute directly to this university’s teacher education program. Coming into this course, my predecessors had already carefully crafted some of the most forward-thinking and social-justice-minded aspects of the policies, content, and assignments, such as the more successful readings, reflective journal assignments, service-learning field experiences, and giving instructors the freedom to translate requirements to suit our teaching styles. Other instructors I’ve seen hired to teach this course also tend to be especially passionate and innovative. They have and continue to exemplify many of the same aims as I have through CCI, though each does so in personalized ways. Who we hire and the resources we provide them, then, largely impact the successful implementation of a social justice mission.

A related concern in social justice teaching and research is that what we do is possibly too unique to the individual instructors and students involved, and therefore may never be fully scalable. While I agree that my enactment of CCI and others’ similar approaches may not be purely replicable—nor do I think they should they be, despite current education trajectories—I do believe the overall matching of our means with our ends, carefully and clearly articulating the assumptions underlying these actions, is a scalable and teachable habit. While I make particular choices, have certain personal characteristics that influence my practice, and my students

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represent a limited sector of the teacher education student population, I believe it is the overall consciousness, caring, and purposeful action that are replicable, in whatever individualized ways they manifest, and modeling these does exert a sustainable influence on the field of teacher education for social justice.

**Impact of Action Research on Personal and Professional Practice**

When I originally entered my graduate degree program in educational and community-based action research, I did not know much about educational research, but I knew what I thought education should be. Because most human activity is inherently social and contextual, I believed education should contribute to both individual and collective flourishing—it should foster curiosity, innovation, and personal growth, as well as the ability to appreciate, support, and collaborate with diverse others toward a common good.

Through action research, I learned how to honor life’s complexity and prioritize the humanity that should be at the center of knowledge building, which to me seemed too often overlooked in mainstream education research and policy. My training nourished in me a critical constructivist researcher stance, which recognizes the interplay between experiences, assumptions, relationships, and contexts. Additionally, by studying methods that invited multiple stakeholders into the knowledge production process, I began to understand the role of power in research. I saw how both research and formal education could actually harm certain individuals if it failed to account for the historical, political, and social inequities they had experienced and continued to experience. In all my research since, I have tried to foreground previously marginalized voices and underrepresented causes, while working toward positive and sustainable social change.
The reflexive nature of action research, and learning its methods from many inspiring action researcher-practitioners, has also contributed to my ability to continually grow as an educator. The action research cycles of reflection and action have become second nature as I persistently work to improve my teaching and students’ experience. In so doing, I also demonstrate an inquiry stance that I hope they will adopt and take into their own teaching, not only to improve their classroom practice, but to help them question norms and become better advocates for their most vulnerable students.

Overall, the emancipatory tenets of action research have greatly influenced both my personal standpoints and my professional practice. My resulting commitments to inclusivity, diversity, critical consciousness, and relational awareness have permeated my inquiries as a researcher, my academic endeavors as a criticalist, and my contributions as a citizen with my own unique positionalities in a global community. In short, and as exemplified in this study, action research has been essential to my ability to uphold and enact my personal and professional ideals.

**Conclusion and an Invitation**

This study of CCI was very inward-looking and context-specific, focusing on understanding and improving my practice in my own setting of an urban, Midwestern teacher education program with a social justice mission (however varied in its actual implementation of this mission). While I have contemplated future directions I might take this research, those in the larger field might also consider implications for their own work. I propose that practitioners consider the local conditions and student populations with which their own teacher candidates will most likely end up working and seek ways to model what those specific students will most
need from their teachers. I challenge educators with social justice values and aims similar to mine to consider their own practices in teacher education, examining whether and how their means align with their ends. I hope that those teachers and researchers who feel as I do, but who may have been intimidated by currently dominant ideologies into hiding or silencing these essential parts of themselves, will be emboldened to join me in standing up for what we believe is right and good. As educators, it is our privilege to create opportunities and alternatives so that all students have a chance to reach their individual potential as well as thrive within, contribute to, and harmoniously interact as equals in a more enlightened and humane world.
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