Towards a Critical Sociocultural Theory of How Teachers Understand Inequity, Power, and Oppression

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Abstract: Teacher educators and researchers argue that teachers must understand inequity, power, and oppression. Critical sociocultural theories suggest that teacher learning is enmeshed in systems, that it either reproduces or contests oppressive power relations, and that resistance is an infinite praxis. However, a review of teacher education literature illustrates that by contrast, teachers' "understanding" of inequity, power, and oppression is typically conceived as being an individual trait, an achievable state, and transferable. This poster calls for more teacher education research to use critical sociocultural theories to conceptualize teacher learning and relatedly, teachers' ability to disrupt oppressive systems.

Keywords: equity, teacher education, critical consciousness, sociocultural, critical theory

Introduction

Teacher educators and scholars have long argued that the world we live in is rife with inequity, and teachers must recognize this and act accordingly. As Alcoff (2007) argues, however, the structures and systems in our society often conceal the mechanisms and the oppressive power relations that produce and maintain inequity. Consequently, those who seek to disrupt the status quo must find ways to perceive what is hard to perceive in order to prevent the reproduction of existing patterns of oppression. But what does it mean for teachers to "understand" inequity, power, and oppression in this way?

Theoretical framework

Educational researchers have long used sociocultural theories of learning to frame phenomena such as teaching practice, teacher identity, and teacher learning (for a review, see Russ, Sherin, & Sherin, 2016). Sociocultural theories of learning foreground the dynamic social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in which learning happens, making them well-suited to the analysis of teachers' "understanding" of inequity. Critical theories additionally center the role of power relations in organizing and structuring social contexts. As a result, learning scientists are increasingly integrating sociocultural theories with critical theories that elucidate the role of power and systems of oppression in learning (e.g., Enyedy, 2016).

Drawing on the work of these scholars, I highlight three ideas that illustrate the promise of critical sociocultural theory to support research into teachers' "understanding" of inequity. First, teacher learning is enmeshed in systems of actors and artifacts, which carry histories embedded with power. Therefore, studies of teacher learning must study systems, and must account for relational histories and situational contexts in learning (e.g., Esmonde & Booker, 2017). Second, power relations within these systems are either reproduced or resisted (e.g., Philip, 2011). Activity that does not resist existing power relations legitimizes the social order, so there is no neutral ground. Third, resisting is an infinite praxis; not only is the status quo too complex to simply overthrow once and for all, but also, transformation requires a constant struggle and a constant effort at provisional action (e.g., Butler, 2005; hooks, 1994). Figure 1 shows the first of these ideas in the two upper sections, the second idea at the bottom, and the third idea represented by the cyclical nature of the diagram.
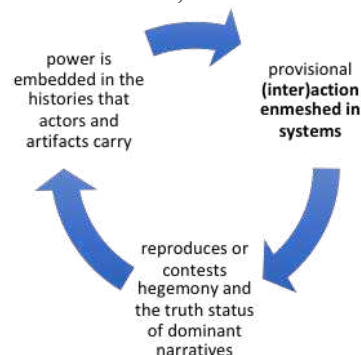
Figure 1. A critical sociocultural theory of teachers' understanding of inequity.

Methods

To determine how "understanding" is conceptualized in existing teacher education literature, I conducted a representative but not exhaustive review of empirical studies that made claims about how K-12 teachers learn to "understand," using search terms such as "critical consciousness" and "teacher education." Three-quarters of the 45 studies described interventions in university-based teacher education courses, and the remainder were mostly observational or action research studies with in-service teachers. I coded studies for their desired outcomes, research design, and evidence of learning (what was learned and by whom?), among other features. Then, I synthesized these codes into themes summarizing how researchers conceptualized teacher "understanding."

Findings

Although exceptions certainly existed, the majority of reviewed articles conceptualized teachers' "understanding" of inequity, power, and oppression as an *individual* trait, as an *achievable* state, and as *transferable* across contexts and situations. Table 1 offers a brief summary of these prevailing assumptions.

Table 1: Typical conceptualizations of teacher understanding

Theme	Evidence in studies	Limitations
Individual trait	Reliance on individual surveys or self-reported statements such as "I realized" and "now I am aware"	Overlooks teachers' historicized selves (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016), the teacher educator's positionality, and artifacts
Achievable state	Describing teachers as being "changed" or "transformed" or as gaining "newfound awareness"	Partitions understanding into discrete levels; does not allow for partial or situational understanding
Transferable	Claims of universal ("children in all places") or general ("I know what racism really is") understanding	Assumes that teachers who "understand" in one interaction, situation, or context will "understand" forevermore

Conclusion

Applying a critical sociocultural theory of teacher learning to studying teachers' "understanding" of inequity, power, and oppression calls for greater attention to the systems and situational contexts of teacher learning in action, to the histories and power dynamics involved, and to moment-to-moment interactions rather than static understandings that can be acquired and applied. Accordingly, teacher educators must seek pedagogies that engage teachers in this active, ongoing, and important work.

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Acknowledgments