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To cite this article:

Min, M., Nelson, R., & Bellows, E. (2024). What have we learned? Teacher agency for social justice amid the traumatic crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal on Studies in Education (IJonSE)*, 6(1), 67-84. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.182>

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What Have We Learned? Teacher Agency for Social Justice amid the Traumatic Crisis with the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article Info

Article History

Received:

07 July 2023

Accepted:

01 November 2023

Keywords

Culturally responsive pedagogy,
Covid-19 pandemic,
Trauma-informed education,
Teacher agency for social justice

Abstract

The unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic caused school disruptions by negatively affecting most students' academic performance. However, the pandemic has taken a heavy toll on students in high-need and disadvantaged communities. Before the pandemic, some teachers who demonstrated a social justice-oriented agency chose to implement Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) in their educational practices to support the academic successes of students from underrepresented backgrounds. However, little is known about how teachers exercised their agency to use CRP during the global health crisis. This qualitative study explores how teachers who had leveraged CRP in the past have worked to sustain their efforts to implement the pedagogy during the national crisis caused by the pandemic. 28 high school teachers were interviewed, and their accounts were analyzed using a constant comparative approach based on grounded theory. Findings illustrate how the teachers practiced CRP before COVID-19, what challenges they confronted in implementing the pedagogy, and how they negotiated their agency to sustain their efforts for promoting social justice. Findings are discussed from a trauma-informed education perspective by providing scholars, educators, and policymakers with valuable theoretical and practical implications for better-supporting students from minoritized families and communities.

Introduction

The unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a worldwide public school shutdown and a shift to remote learning in 2020. Although people have been living in this pandemic for about three years and the World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged it is at a "transition point" (Dillinger, 2023), schools and teachers are still struggling to cope with the traumatic experiences of a global health crisis, with many questions still unanswered. For example, it remains unclear whether school closure contributes to slowing the spread of the coronavirus, whether the virus is less severe in children than adults, and how transmission in schools occurs (Lewis, 2021). Although the role of school closures in mitigating this public health crisis remains uncertain, school closures and changes in instructional modes with little preparation time for educators have undoubtedly widened existing academic gaps between students from racially, ethnically, culturally, and socio-economically underrepresented communities and their counterparts (Dorn et al., 2020).

Recent studies have reported that school disruptions have negatively affected most students' academic growth (Clark et al., 2020; Doz & Doz, 2023; Engzell et al., 2021; Schult et al., 2022). However, the pandemic has taken an especially heavy toll on students in high-need and disadvantaged communities (Catalano et al., 2021). Those students have struggled with poor access to the requirements of remote learning, including internet access, devices, and live contact with teachers, and they have not had the option of going to a private school or homeschooling like their more affluent counterparts in order to minimize learning losses (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Hu & Huang, 2022). Students from culturally and linguistically underrepresented families have faced an additional layer of challenges triggered by linguistic barriers and a lack of digital resources for assisting their communications and academic learning (Hu & Huang, 2022; Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers who demonstrated a social justice-oriented agency chose to implement various inclusive pedagogies in their teaching practices to better support the academic successes of these underrepresented students and eliminate various forms of oppression (Francis & Le Roux, 2011). Culturally responsive pedagogy (hereafter, CRP) is one of these pedagogies in which teachers intentionally include “prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities” of students in their curriculum and instruction (Gay, 2010, p. 22). Many studies highlight the positive effects of CRP in terms of improving the academic performance of students from minority communities and reducing systematic inequalities that exist in the current educational system (Brown et al., 2020; Pena, 2023). However, little is known about how teachers exercised their agency to use CRP during this difficult time with COVID-19 pandemic. On a similar note, scant attention has been paid to how teachers exert their agency to promote social justice in traumatic situations.

The present study aims to fill this void by exploring how teachers who had leveraged CRP in the past have worked to sustain their efforts to implement the pedagogy during the national crisis caused by the pandemic. This study will not only add to the existing theoretical knowledge about how teachers use their agency in pursuit of social justice but will provide practical implications for supporting teachers who strive to improve educational inequality despite the contextual constraints imposed by the traumatic circumstances of a public health emergency. This study is guided by the following three questions:

- How did the teachers exercise their agency towards CRP before the pandemic?
- What prevented the teachers from achieving their agency towards CRP during the pandemic?
- How did the teachers reconcile the traumatic situation caused by pandemic and sustain their efforts to promote social justice through CRP?

Literature Review

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

CRP is an instructional approach that empowers students from diverse backgrounds intellectually, socially, and emotionally by teaching them using their “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles” instead of ones reflecting the dominant ideologies (Gay, 2010, p. 31). By embracing CRP in the classroom, teachers actively work to identify students' strengths, rather than using deficit language (Ladson-Billings, 2014). It is through the development of *cultural competence*, or “the ability to help students appreciate

and celebrate their cultures of origin” that teachers work to incorporate multiple viewpoints into both their curriculum and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75).

When leveraging CRP, teachers help students from racially, culturally, and socio-economically underrepresented groups improve their academic performance by reducing problems related to discipline, attendance, and class participation by increasing relevance and engagement (Gay, 2018; Yuan, 2018). Gay (2002) shares that this work is rooted in care, concern, and respect for one’s students and driven by the “deep belief in the possibility of transcendence” (p. 109). CRP is demonstrated through both the language and actions of the classroom (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Teachers with social justice-oriented agendas have acknowledged the benefits of CRP and implemented it to promote more equal learning opportunities. Bassey (2016) notes that the use of CRP “cements the connection between social justice and pedagogy” by creating spaces for discussions that would not normally take place about society (p. 5). Employing CRT in the classroom also acknowledges the historical disadvantages that students of color often encounter during their schooling (Pena, 2023). The interplay between CRP and social justice-oriented teaching also works to recognize the sociopolitical context of these issues within society, not just the classroom (Hammond, 2015).

Teacher Agency for Social Justice

Many existing studies on the concept of teacher agency have discussed it in the context of educational reforms. Some have described teacher agency as a phenomenon influenced by individual teachers’ histories, goals, and contextual opportunities and constraints (Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, & Robinson, 2015; Tao & Gao, 2017; Wallen & Tormey, 2019), and others have referred to it as institutional agency, asserting that daily instructional actions influence either the maintaining or dismantling of their institutions (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Lockton & Fargason, 2019; Pantić et al., 2021). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) articulated two notions of teacher agency: projective and practical evaluative agency. Bridwell-Mitchell (2015) described two notions of teacher agency suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998): projective and practical evaluative agency. The former acts as “a source of institutional persistence with social conflict and challenge maintaining the status quo,” whereas the latter serves as “a source of institutional change with teachers’ interpretations, collaboration, and adaptations of reform shifting the status quo” (p. 142). Another viewpoint defines teacher agency as a moral term. For example, Buzzelli and Johnston (2002) claimed that teaching is a moral activity and teachers are moral agents, and Soleimani and Lovat (2019) reemphasized this point by highlighting the role of teachers as “keeping and manifesting morality in teaching” (p. 10).

Recent literature has highlighted the role of teachers as change agents who can correct injustices in the current educational system (Miller et al., 2020; Pantić, 2017). However, empirical evidence regarding how teachers leverage their agency to enact change and social justice in a school environment remains scant (Li & Ruppard, 2021). Pantić (2015) explained that the lack of studies on how teachers use their agency to further social justice relates to the conceptual ambiguity of the topic. There is a need for more studies exploring how teachers construct

and exercise their agency to further social justice and investigate the opportunities and barriers they face in doing so are needed, in order to “specify appropriate units of analysis and generate [a] hypothesis” clarifying the concept (Pantić, 2015, p. 2).

To contribute to this line of discourse, Authors (2021) explored influential factors on how teachers initially develop their agency for social justice and external factors that strengthen or weaken it. Their findings revealed that support from the community, colleagues, and administration, as well as the observed effectiveness of the pedagogy in improving students’ academic achievement function as enablers allowing teachers to exercise their agency to use CRP. On the other hand, contextual constraints such as lack of time to prepare for CRP, pushback from others, and personal factors such as teachers’ low competence in cultural understanding, knowledge, and ability to use the pedagogy effectively were perceived as challenges that prevented teachers’ achievement of agency to use CRP. More needs to be known about how teacher agency for social justice with CRP works in situations where both teachers and students experience trauma caused by the global health crisis.

Trauma-Informed Education Perspective

The model for trauma-informed education suggested by Harper and Neubaruer (2020) provides educators and administrators with valuable insights and guidelines regarding how to address the trauma caused by COVID-19 for effective teaching and learning. The model discusses how school administrators, teachers, and students have reciprocal relationships as power brokers in the decision-making, planning, and implementation of teaching and learning practices during the pandemic. Although teachers’ agency to plan and implement their lessons is limited by hierarchically-based administrative decision-making, teachers can influence how the administrators make the decisions. Likewise, though students’ learning experiences are shaped mainly by how teachers plan and implement their instruction, their performance also influences the teachers’ instructional decisions.

The model further suggests that the following six principles need to be organically integrated into the bidirectional interactions: 1) safety, 2) transparency and trustworthiness, 3) peer support, 4) collaboration and mutuality, 5) empowerment, voice, and choice, and 6) reflection on cultural, historical, and gender issues. *Safety* refers to how administrators and teachers act as power brokers within the school environment. They should ensure that their students, teachers, and administrators feel safe physically and emotionally. *Transparency and trustworthiness* highlights the importance of the power brokers’ communication efforts that clearly informs why and how decisions that influence their teaching and learning activities are made. When they make the decisions, they should also actively seek out opinions from the agents with lower levels of power and invite them to the decision-making process as represented in the principle of *collaboration and mutuality*.

Peer support denotes that the power brokers should create and nurture school and classroom environments where the less powerful agents in the schools share their own experiences comfortably and get support from each other to survive from the traumatic situation. *Empowerment, voice, and choice* in the model address that the power brokers should ensure that all groups of agents with less power should get the opportunity to self-advocate and make their voices heard. Lastly, *cultural, historical, and gender issues* remind teachers and administrators of the

value of engaging in a critical self-reflection and development processes that would help them “to reject past cultural stereotypes and biases, offer access to culturally responsive education and services, support cultural connections for educators and students, recognize and address past historical trauma, and review and revise programs, policies, and practices” (p. 21).

The perspective also indicates that the risks or damages caused by COVID-19 can be perceived differently depending on each individual, group, community, or society. Pandemic-related, mass-, historical, and current personal stressors and trauma should also be considered as out-of-school contexts. For example, the stress and disruption levels for those “who experience current or historical oppression and unjust treatment such as people of color, sexual and gender minorities, and people with differing abilities” during the pandemic were higher than those who were not (Harper & Neubaruer, 2020, p. 19). The model is presented in Figure 1.

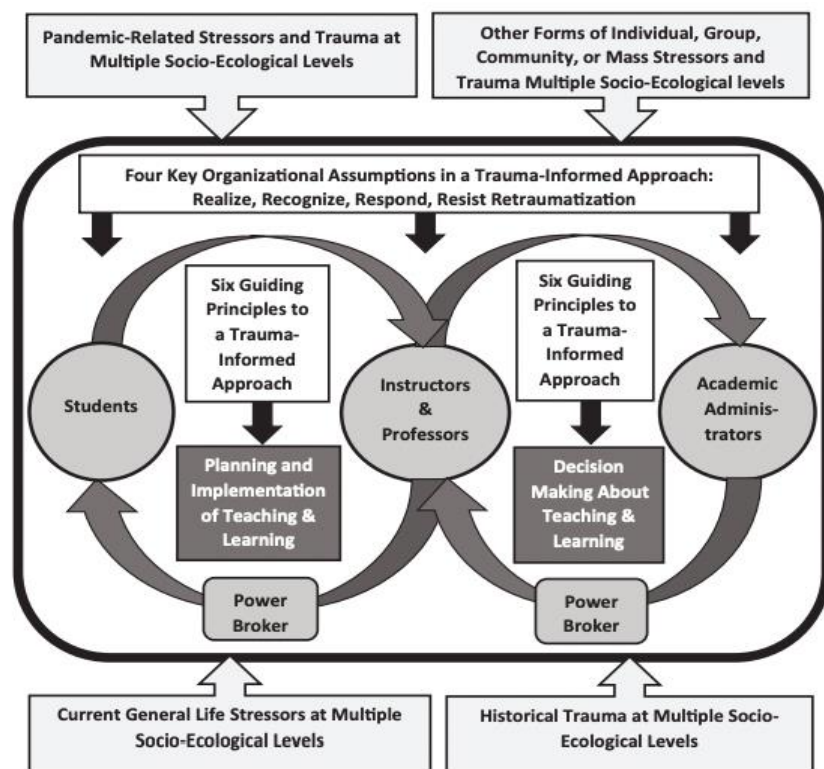


Figure 1. Model for Trauma-informed Education and Administration (Harper & Neubauer, 2021, p. 16)

Method

Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative research method with Glaser and Strauss’s (2017) grounded theory to capture teacher voices about how their agency toward CRP has been affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Grounded theory, one of the most frequently used qualitative approaches by educational scholars, is a process of developing a theory from the data (Birks & Mills, 2015; Kolb, 2012). This study used a purposive sampling approach to recruit participants to elicit deep insights and provide a better understanding of teacher agency towards CRP during the COVID-19 pandemic (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Purposive sampling is a strategy of recruiting participants that are most likely to provide useful information according to the study purpose:

Purposive sampling strategies move away from any random form of sampling and are strategies to make sure that specific kinds of cases of those that could be included are part of the final sample in the research study. (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 654)

The target representative group for this study was high school teachers who implemented CRP with positive agency towards the pedagogy in their teaching practices before their schools were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the goals of this study were to explore how teachers achieved agency in implementing CRP and how they reconciled their agency towards the pedagogy during this national crisis, teachers who had developed and demonstrated positive agency towards CRP through their educational practices before the pandemic were purposefully selected. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' university and the research participants before recruitment commenced.

Invitation emails for recruitment included descriptions of the purpose of the study, interview procedures, and incentives for participants. They were initially sent out to the teachers who participated in our previous project, which explored how teachers developed positive agency towards CRP. The teachers who agreed to participate in the study were contacted by the researchers to schedule either Zoom (<https://zoom.us>) or phone interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure the richness of data by both remaining responsive to the participants and ensuring relevancy to the focuses of the study (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The following are examples of the predetermined questions posed to participants:

- How did you implement CRP methods in your teaching before the pandemic?
- Do you still implement CRP in your teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, how does this national crisis influence your CRP practices? If not, what made you stop implementing the strategy in your current teaching?
- If you still implement CRP in your teaching, what helps you continue to take the approach during this challenging time?
- What challenges did you experience in your CRP practices during this pandemic?

Each interview was between 30 and 40 minutes long and was video or audio recorded. The interviews recorded were transcribed verbatim and used as data for further analysis.

Participants

A total of 28 high school teachers participated in this study by expressing their interests with informed consent for the interviews. Seven of them identified their gender as male and 19 identified as female. One of them identified as nonbinary. The participants had various years of teaching experience. Specifically, 25% (n = 7) of the participants had 1–5 years, 21.0% (n = 6) had 6–10 years, 11.0% (n = 3) had 11–15 years, 21.4% (n = 6) had 16–20 years, and 21.4% (n = 6) had more than 20 years of teaching experience. The participants also taught various subject areas, including English, math, social studies, science, etc. Table 1 below summarizes the participants' information.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Teacher	Gender	Teaching Experiences	School Level	Subject
Liam	M	20 years	High school	English
Noah	F	22 years	High school	Math and Special Education
Charlotte	F	4 years	High school	History
Amelia	F	3 years	High school	Fine Arts
Olivia	Non-binary	5 years	High school	Math
Elijah	M	5 years	High school	English
Benjamin	M	15 years	High school	Engineering
Isabella	F	6 years	High school	Science
Henry	F	12 years	High school	English
Evelyn	F	18 years	High school	Fine Arts
Harper	F	19 years	High school	Fine Arts
Sophia	F	9 years	High school	EC/OSC Teacher
Ava	F	17 years	High school	Health/PE/Leadership
Emma	F	3 years	High school	English/Language Arts
Sydney	F	16 years	High school	Art
Mary	F	23 years	High school	Science
Michael	M	7 years	High school	Orchestra/Chinese
Karen	F	29 years	High school	Math
Nancy	F	4 years	High school	Theatre Arts and Creative Writing
Anthony	M	19 years	High school	English

Data Analysis

A constant comparative approach, guided by Corbin and Strauss (2008), was employed in data analysis. To obtain a clear picture of how teachers perceived their agency towards CRT amid the pandemic and generate theory regarding teacher agency for social justice from the data collected, the constant comparative approach employed here included three stages of coding processes: 1) open coding, 2) axial coding, and 3) selective coding. First, three researchers read all 28 transcribed interviews multiple times to get themselves familiar with the participants' accounts and then conducted open coding independently. During the open coding, the researchers focused on comparing data and identifying "categories, properties, and dimensions" that explain teacher agency toward CRP during COVID-19 (Kolb, 2012, p. 84).

The three researchers shared, reviewed, and discussed their open coding results over multiple meetings. They then moved on to the second stage of the constant comparative approach, axial coding, in order to find out the relationships that emerged among the categories, and they generated their subcategories through constant inductive and deductive analysis processes. Finally, in the last stage, selective coding, the researchers identified

the core category by validating similarities and relationships among all other categories, systematically connecting them to the core category, and refining them to generate theory (Kolb, 2012). To ensure validity and reliability, member checking was conducted and an outside researcher reviewed the data and shared opinions on how to code the data whenever discrepancies arose. Based on his inputs, the conflicting points were resolved, by reaching full consensus.

Results

This section discusses the themes that emerged from the data analysis in order to address the three research questions regarding teacher agency towards CRP as influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The data has been formatted below with the intention of capturing the teachers' lively voices. Specifically, the themes represent how the participating teachers perceived their degree of agency regarding changes to their CRP implementation between pre-and post-pandemic teaching. In addition, the themes include teachers' experiences that promoted and challenged them to exercise their agency towards CRP during the pandemic.

Teachers' CRP Practices before the Global Pandemic

The analysis revealed four themes that address the first research question inquiring about teachers' CRP practices before the pandemic: (1) challenging assumptions and acknowledging systematic oppression, (2) understanding and accepting diversity, (3) incorporating diverse perspectives into curriculum and instruction, and (4) building relationships.

Challenging Assumptions and Acknowledging Systematic Oppression

The teachers described that they worked hard on challenging underlying assumptions students had and attempted to help them understand and acknowledge systematic oppression existed in our society:

Olivia: We did a unit on poverty, and how people can end up houseless because we were building for folks who were houseless, we wanted them to not just have stereotypical ideas of those folks.

Nancy: In class I would make sure to not use plays that focus on all straight white men, and you know include diversity. Also in class, we would actively talk about casting and production with the way that shows are written and how race and gender affect those from the ground up. From when it shows being begun, we talked about the systematic oppression of black and brown people and we talked about the world of auditioning as a woman versus a man... things like that.

Understanding and Accepting Diversity

The teachers described their CRP practices as the process of helping their students understand and accept various types of diversity, such as culture and religion. The following two teachers' accounts represent this theme:

Donna: Making them understand the differences that their friends can bring in the classroom but I've never pointed out that your friends are different when it comes to race or nationality per se - like blatantly

saying this person is that. But, like giving them the ability to say ‘okay, we just had Christmas. Did you celebrate it in your house or not? If not, why not, what do you do to celebrate?’ You know things like that, bringing third different experiences in.

Sydney:...And then they would make their own yarn paintings, so they would paint using yarn to make these pictures and we would talk about what the Huichol tribe would do. And how their way was very spiritual and it had certain meetings and certain symbols. Then we would bring in: what in your culture, what kind of symbols and symbolism comes from your culture, from your religion, from your area around here? Then they would make their own version of that.

Incorporating Diverse Culture and Perspectives into Curriculum and Instruction

The teachers achieved their social-justice-oriented agency towards CRP, by connecting their instruction to diverse culture students bring to their classrooms and including perspectives of authors from marginalized populations to their curriculum. The following accounts from Sydney and Emma represents this theme:

Sydney: So it's just a natural thing for us as art teachers from the get go to just kind of do that and to connect it to our students and to connect it to their religion, their gender, their household. If they come from another country and moved here, or you know my background is Irish, whereas some of my students have a background of Spanish so being able to have those different experiences and they all just naturally fit into the art room to begin with.

Emma: So trying to bring in voices from more Black, Hispanic and native authors. I also teach world literature, which is 10th grade, and in that class they tend to only have, you know, works of European authors, so I made sure to where possible opt out of teaching those types and teach things from Asia, Africa... and from the Middle East as well.

Building Relationships

The teachers perceived that the most important tenet of CRP is building relationships with students. According to the teachers, building rapport with students through the processes of getting to know each other should be a primary focus in order to reap the benefits of CRP. To better learn about students and build genuine relationships with students, Olivia collected student information at the beginning of the semester and Brian emphasized the importance of validating who his students are:

Olivia: I would always do info sheets at the beginning of every year and then trying to incorporate things like check ins and group talk that wasn't math related to get to know my students better. Then from there use that to inform the context of our instruction as much as possible.

Brian: I want to know who you are and it's important to validate color. It's important to validate differences. It's what you do with it. To bring them into the fold to learn about each other that makes it, I think stronger. I think that's what cultural responsiveness is you know, so you don't have to know everything. But you do need to respond to ways to demonstrate that you're seeking to understand. I think that's more important than you're accessible.

Teacher Agency Confronting Challenges

The participating teachers tried to sustain their efforts of implementing CRP in their teaching despite the unexpected changes in their instructional modes. However, they encountered challenges that prevented them from applying the CRP approach to their educational practice as they did prior to the pandemic. Their frustrations and struggles for achieving positive agency towards CRP are represented as the following four themes: (1) Lack of students engagement, (2) difficulty learning about students correctly, (3) incompatibility of effective instructional strategies for enacting CRP in online schooling, and (4) lack of support from administrators and parents.

Lack of Students Engagement

The teachers were struggling to promote students' engagement with their teaching especially when they had online classes. Specifically, distractions caused by remote learning at home was one reason why students were hardly engaging in their online classes as described by Amelia:

Amelia: Helping younger siblings do work stuff... if you have other things going on, like you know dogs barking or construction happening like... you know there's a million different things that make it [engaging] impossible.

Another reason for the perceived lack of engagement was that many students turned off their cameras when they participated in online classes and it made students feel no accountability in terms of participating in online classes.

Timothy: Some of them are not even actually there. They have their camera off and they've definitely walked away and I'm like 'Rachel? Rachel, are you there? Are you with us?' - no response, so I wouldn't say it's 100% functional.

Difficulty Learning about Students Correctly

The teachers perceived CRP as a process of building relationships and getting to know about their students better. However, the instructional changes triggered by the pandemic made them struggle with learning about their students in order to implement CRP in their practices successfully.

Charlotte: I do have a lot of anxiety about the fact that when they're not here at school, the way they typically are... I don't necessarily know what their circumstances are. And, and I don't always know why they can't get in touch with me or why I can't get in touch with them. I mean, so I think I probably have some sadness and a little anxiety about that.

Dorothy: ...it becomes even more important to try to be responsive to what culturally is going on at home, I have a large Hispanic population, and I know that...with my girls, they have a greater responsibility of maintaining home. And you know doing more housework and babysitting and things like those so trying to be responsive to them. I know they're bearing the brunt of all the home, keeping things...the African American population...my struggle with them is...a lot of them are living with grandparents...and those poor grandparents, they want to help, but the technology and getting on there to look to see you know if their child has done the assignments.

Incompatibility of Effective Instructional Strategies for Enacting CRP in Online Schooling

The teachers were struggling to implement CRP in their instructional activities with the COVID-19 restrictions. They believed that the use of CRP would benefit everyone by promoting discussion and collaboration among their students. However, neither face-to-face instruction with 6-foot distance restriction and online teaching did provide teachers with the optimal environment to practice CRP as Brian described “Trying to deal with the culture of technology and how to use this as a new culture really I mean, I've never taught like this before”. Two other teachers below also describe this challenge:

Karen: In class, we still do that [CRP] to a certain degree, but we can't share papers, we can have discussion, but we can't have like little pods of people in different spots so it's still more of a whole group. And that's not the way I would normally do it [CRP]...

Dorothy: I've struggled this year with adapting my teaching philosophy to these new restrictions. And I just find trying to do it on technology, you know that collaboration on using the technology it's just not the same... What I feel is the most powerful component, and that is just that real life organic conversation that happens between kids... When they're having to type it in so much is lost in that rich discussion and so I'm struggling with providing the same experience.

Lack of Autonomy

The teachers described the top-down approach and lack of transparency about the decisions made with regard to their teaching practices were frustrating and weakened their agency to enact CRP:

Timothy: I think one of the other things that's been really disheartening for both students and teachers...is the lack of just clarity and transparency from the county level and from the state level this year...I don't understand why we're doing this so, then when they make these last-minute decisions it kind of feels very disheartening and kind of like a bit disrespectful to the teachers...

The lack of support from administrators and pushback from parents also weakened teachers' sense of autonomy to teach students with CRP approach:

Amelia: So I remember coming in, after the summer when the Black Lives Matter movement was still really in the news cycle all the time and there were still lots of protests happening. I remember one of our first faculty meetings. One of our administrators said point blank: ‘You are here to teach. You're not here to be political so be sure that you are not...Our lawyers have told us to tell everybody that it's not worth losing your job over to be political’. This was extremely frustrating, because it was very related to Black Lives Matter protests and it was right there in that context, and so there was no way to misconstrue, at least in my mind, no way to misconstrue what he was talking about... Oh, it kind of feels like just an impossible balance to strike, I mean I'm making administrators happy and also trying to be true to yourself as a teacher.

Liam: ...one of my group weekly discussions was on Black Lives Matter and I had more pushback on that topic than I've ever had in my teaching career...There were three very angry parents that we would even talk about it and I said well nobody's pushing anything we're just discussing what everybody's discussing and this is an honors level English class. Why would we not talk about it?

Development of Negotiated Agency for Social Justice

Despite the difficult situations triggered by the national crisis with the pandemic, the teachers navigated the challenges by developing a negotiated agency for implementing CRP facilitated by contextual affordance. The teachers' negotiated agency for social justice with CRP approach was translated into their teaching practices in the following four ways: 1) Reflecting on students' interests to improve their engagement, (2) understanding students' out-of-school lives, (3) strengthening the sense of connection.

Reflecting on Students' Interests to Improve Their Engagement

With the challenge of promoting students' engagement in this difficult time, the teachers focused on finding students' interests and incorporating them into their instructions to practice CRP:

Olivia:...there's always just a check-in question... To what was the most memorable part of the last year was...I come from a restorative practices school where we did a lot of circling and so I'm used to getting to the point where students feel very comfortable having really intense conversations with one another and sharing parts of themselves...I think it helps the class think. It's not just important for them as humans, I think it's important for the classroom too.

Kenneth: They use a lot of Nearpod of their other classes, which is like a PowerPoint based system where they have to type stuff and interact with it. And I don't use it, because when I talked to them, they said 'we see this so much much if you did this [Nearpod] here it would be my fourth of the day'...Little things like that, it seriously helps because they don't come in here expecting the same thing they get from every other class.

Understanding Students' Out-of-School lives

Teachers reported they started to work hard on learning about their students' out-of-school lives. They were worried about how their students' lives looked like outside of their schools and tried to figure out how their out-of-school lives affected their studies given that they did not come to schools every day due to the covid restrictions. Their efforts of getting to know about students' out-of-school lives gave them opportunities to recognize the privileges they had and make conscious actions to meet the unique needs of their students through their educational practices:

Isabella:...in the fall I drove around to all my students' physical houses and wherever they live and dropped off packets, like in their mailboxes and I actually live one district over and so I'm not in this community as much. Driving around and seeing some of the really desolate conditions...I got in my car and cried after seeing some of these kids' places where they live...some of these kids have so much that's out of their control, right now, and we have a lot of students too that live in multi-generational situations. I have a student who could not come to class online for the last month because he is responsible for taking care of his grandmother, who has dementia and PTSD. This is like all being thrown on the shoulders of a 14-year-old kid. And, just like trying to figure out ways I can make things work for them.

Sophia:...During lockdown I did a lot of online shopping and I quickly learned...that is a luxury modern,

luxury convenience...a lot of my kids don't do that or their family. This semester, in particular... I have a fridge in my classroom and I provide water bottles with flavoring packets and there's always a basket of snack and they can come in throughout the day and get one...It just says 'hey, I know you have a longer bus ride take chips, so you have something to eat so when you get home at 6:30 and you're not starving to death'...I made a more conscious effort to make sure every kid had a breakfast or had an opportunity to enjoy it because I quickly realized that might have been their only meal since they were here last time.

Strengthening the Sense of Connection

The teachers also focused on strengthening students' sense of connection and sense of community through their CRP practices as it was significantly weakened due to the changed instruction delivery format to online:

Timothy: To make them feel special I was trying to send postcards on their birthdays and stuff like that...At least kind of just like letting them know like hey, I still care about you guys I'm still here, let me know if you need help with anything...Definitely not 100% but a couple of them were more willing to share out perspectives and experiences in our in-class discussions, a bit more.

Kenneth: We worked on the teacher-student relationship and student-student relationship so that we could actually work on the stuff in the classroom with students talking to one another, talking to me. I think the biggest part has been just building the connection between the students and then seeing what comes from that. Once you know those students, they group up and facilitate discussion and talk to each other and still work through those same things just a little bit differently.

Discussion

This study explored how teachers experienced and navigated challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to sustain their efforts to achieve their agency for social justice with CRP practices from a trauma-informed education perspective. The findings of this study give valuable insights for advancing theoretical discourses of teacher agency for social justice and promoting discussion among practitioners for improving education for racially, ethnically, culturally, and socio-economically underrepresented students during the public health emergency. The study results explicate how social justice-oriented teacher agency is expressed, negotiated, and exercised in the national crisis circumstance and how it influences other key agents, such as students and administrators, reciprocally in the school contexts.

First, teacher agency for social justice was exercised in a complex manner by continually interacting with internal and external constraints and their personal beliefs regarding either moral or professional roles by corroborating previous research that explores what teacher agency is and how it is manifested in school environments (Leo et al., 2020; Priestley et al., 2015; Pantić et al., 2021; Tao & Gao, 2017). Teachers in this study negotiated how to exercise their social justice-oriented agency of implementing CRP during the health crisis. Before the pandemic occurred, the teachers practiced CRP in a way that helped students uncover underlying assumptions and gain awareness about systematic oppression that existed in our society, by supporting them in developing critical

thinking skills. In addition, they also focused on providing students with ample opportunities to learn about various types of diversity, such as culture and religion, and perspectives that were often excluded from the formal curriculum when they practiced CRP in their teaching.

The teachers, however, found that those core CRP practices would not be able to be implemented effectively in their continuously changing and unpredictable teaching environments during the pandemic. As Leo et al. (2020) and Harper and Neubauer (2021) noted, the teachers' agency achievement in practicing CRP was negotiated through the dynamic interplay with student agency weakened by the traumatized circumstance. Specifically, students were less engaged and less accountable for their online learning environments. The weakened student agency for social justice led teachers to prioritize the instructional focus of CRP as improving students' engagement and strengthening their sense of membership over examining existing societal inequities and promoting the inclusion of voices from all groups.

The findings in this study also provide empirical evidence supporting Harper and Neubauer (2021)'s model for trauma-informed education in the context of secondary education schools. The participating teachers struggled to practice the pedagogy for promoting social justice as they did before the pandemic because they were concerned about job security. As the model indicated, administrators should create an environment where teachers feel physically and emotionally safe during a traumatic situation. However, as Amelia and Liam illustrated, they felt threatened not to use current social issues that uncovered the systematic oppression imposed on particular racial groups as their instructional materials by their administrator and parents. The power brokers failed to empower teachers to sustain their efforts to promote social justice through CRP practices that engage students in critical discourse that could dismantle existing inequity, by silencing teachers' voices and not taking away their choices over instructions.

In addition, findings in this study revealed that cultural, historical, and gender factors described in Harper and Neubauer (2021)'s model influenced negotiating teacher agency for social justice. Teachers perceived the prerequisite to implementing CRP successfully was building relationships with students, by getting to know about students' lives outside of their schools. However, the instructional mode changed to online or hybrid limited their interactions with students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds and prevented them from improving their sensitivity and responsiveness to making cultural connections to their students' home environments. As Dorothy mentioned, his Hispanic and female students were expected to prioritize their house work such as babysitting over school work, and African American students living with grandparents from low socio-economic status were challenged to obtain necessary academic support.

Moreover, as Timothy's comment represents, teachers were not invited to the decision-making process regarding instructional modes including f2f, hybrid, and online. The absence of a collaborative decision-making process for teaching modalities reduced the mutuality among administrators, teachers, and students, and it negatively influenced empowering teachers and students with less autonomy and a sense of ownership in their teaching and learning activities. The teachers interviewed did not perceive they were ready to switch their courses to online for effective CRP implementation. They found online teaching environments incompatible with using strategies for

CRP enactment and experienced frustrations of not reaping the benefits of the approach.

Despite the challenges teachers experienced, they strived to sustain their agency for social justice through CRP practices. It was noticeable that the teachers focused on incorporating principles of peer support, cultural, historical, and gender issues, and collaboration and mutuality suggested by Harper and Neubauer (2021)'s model into their CRP enactment. As Kenneth mentioned about her decision not to use the Nearpod program during her instruction, teachers tried to invite students to decide how they would teach. In addition, as Olivia stated, the teachers tried to create a space where students could feel comfortable exchanging their own perspectives and cultivating their self-advocacy skills. They also focused on finding strategies for strengthening the teacher-student relationship and student-student connections. Lastly, they went out to find out what their students' outside-of-school environments looked like, identified their unique needs, engaged in critical reflection on privileges they have enjoyed, and made necessary changes on their educational practices to support their student's sound growth better.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the field of education in several significant ways. First, given that the global pandemic has aggravated the disparities in learning opportunities between students of color and others, the findings can inform administrators and policymakers of ways to help teachers continue to address the needs of the populations most negatively affected by school shutdowns and remote learning. Second, the study provides ideas for educational scholars to advance theoretical discourses about the concepts of teachers' agency and social justice agendas during the crisis. Last, it can provide urgently needed insights for both educators and researchers about how to enact CRP during the pandemic and after.

Notes

This research was supported from the Harkrader Family Foundation Faculty Research Award at the Appalachian State University.

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