What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

"Deeply reflective and an absolutely essential tool for educators at all levels! This brilliant and powerfully transformative guide takes us along a journey of learning that includes a deep dive into understanding how our very own story and experiences shape our beliefs and behaviors toward social justice in education."

—**Gloria E. Ciriza,** Assistant Superintendent,
San Diego County Office of Education

"The authors provide the perfect balance—a guide to self-reflection and a call to action. This is the right guide for the right time. The journey to becoming a social justice educator starts now!"

—**Peter Dallas Finch,** Superintendent,
West Valley School District

"*Becoming a Social Justice Educator* is a powerful read for anyone hoping to create learning spaces in which all students feel valued and respected. The reflection questions and activities built into each chapter lead the reader on a powerful journey of vulnerability and greater self-awareness. If schools are to be a safe, inclusive space for all students to excel and be successful, we must better understand the impact our experiences have on the system in which we work."

—**Amy DeLaRosa,** Systems Alignment Specialist,
Kansas MTSS and Alignment

Becoming a Social Justice Educator

Becoming a Social Justice Educator

A Guide With Practice

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CORWIN

Fisher & Frey

Contents

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Publisher's Acknowledgments

Introduction

We must first acknowledge and agree upon this: diversity, equity, and inclusion can be complex. Schools and the educators in them are tasked with facilitating positive educational and social outcomes for children. That is more likely to happen in schools where community members are treated equitably, and where equitable distribution of resources is a priority, but social justice sometimes gets politicized. The mention of diversity, equity, and inclusion makes some people defensive. We ask that you avoid looking at social justice through a political lens or as something imposed on students to force them to behave in some prescribed way. As authors, we all believe students should be free to choose how they see the world. We do not believe children should be told to dislike or influenced to shame others in the name of social justice. Instead, we ask readers to consider social justice as this: a community agreement about the fair treatment of everyone and the fair distribution of resources and opportunities.

Ensuring students' schools and classrooms are safe and respectful learning environments is not always easy. As a group of authors, we believe that teachers come into this profession to make a difference. Teachers positively impact students' social, emotional, and academic lives. We believe no educator goes into the teaching profession to hold lower expectations for some students, to treat students unfairly, or to emotionally hurt them. That said, we are not naïve. Sometimes, school communities know or strongly suspect their policies, practices, and behaviors negatively affect students.

This is why there is an urgent need for social justice educators. There is a need for educators who see the beauty of diversity, who encourage curiosity about the perspectives of others, and who engage students in dialogue that matters. We understand the importance of an education that is academically rigorous, but also ask that we please ensure that students see the value they bring to the classroom. We want to ensure that all students realize their personal goals. To support this work, we ask that we all take on the task of ensuring that school resources and opportunities are distributed equitably.

While we understand this may be easier to accomplish in some places than others, we ask that you do what you can to help all students have wonderful, equitable experiences at school. While this book focuses heavily on students and school staff, please keep in mind that students' families and communities also have a role in ensuring that resources are distributed equitably and that all students feel like they belong. When teachers, students, staff, and families work together to reconcile social

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justice challenges, that collaboration can be a spark that ignites positive change and strengthens a school community.

We wrote this book to serve as a guide to creating positive school and classroom communities. All students' voices should be heard. As part of our content standards, teachers are responsible for teaching students to express themselves through speaking and writing. We can use those opportunities to encourage students to share their ideas and respond to the ideas of others; we must also teach them how to do so. Schools must be courageous enough to allow students to bring their authentic selves to classroom discussions and to comment on school policies that impact them. This requires schools to allow authentic, respectful, developmentally appropriate discussions about privilege and discrimination.

Importantly, such discussions do not aim to make any school community member feel guilty or divide school community members. Rather, these discussions are meant to increase school community members' understanding of each other and of themselves.

This book will ask you to reflect on your personal and professional life and decide what you believe is right and good for children and society. You may find some concepts in these pages that you've never considered before, and the novelty of those concepts might cause you some discomfort. Such discomfort may be a sign of cognitive dissonance—your reconciliation of how you see this book's concepts relative to your experiences. We encourage you to recognize that dissonance and consider the ideas we present as they may allow you to come to terms with your thinking and help you take action.

> *Children should have champions— social justice educators—who ensure that schools are a place of wonder and joy.*

We are a multiracial, gender-diverse group of authors who are members of various communities. For us, exploring social justice concepts together has been a journey of collective self-discovery and an affirmation of the power of schools. We are affirmed in our collective belief that schools must be inclusive, unbiased places for all children. Sadly, while all students should learn in inclusive, fair classrooms where they are encouraged to be their beautifully authentic selves, a cursory look at news headlines about schooling reveals that some students are marginalized and need equal justice, equitable opportunities, and their fair share of school resources.

When Corwin asked us to write this book, we all jumped at the opportunity. There are teachers, school leaders, and a school district superintendent on our writing team. We are excited to share what we have learned about ourselves and our path to becoming social justice educators. Children should have champions—social justice educators—who ensure that schools are a place of wonder and joy. Individually, we have worked hard over the years to ensure that our respective schools are places where every child feels comfortable learning and where students can succeed. We are happy to share what we have learned with you.

In writing this book, our mission has been twofold:

1. To bridge the gap between academic research on practices and policies related to culturally responsive practices and actual classroom practices

2. To support educators in building a more inclusive learning environment for all students

We do not believe there is a one-size-fits-all approach to creating an inclusive learning environment for all learners. Instead, our research leaves room for you to subjectively relate what is in this book to your own experiences and to apply the identified pedagogies, practices, and principles to your classroom in ways that work best for your students.

We are thrilled that you have chosen to join us in reflecting on schooling and the importance of becoming social justice educators. Let's begin.

CHAPTER 1

Know Yourself

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> Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway.
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> —Mother Teresa

Who am I?

That is certainly a question that has fueled philosophers, poets, scholars, and spiritual leaders across the span of human existence. The quest to understand ourself never ends, partly because how we define ourself changes across experiences. Forging an identity as a social justice educator begins with deepening your understanding of yourself.

It is a common misconception that being a social justice educator requires you to leap in and do something to change others: to change students, colleagues, and systems. Of course, taking action in the name of social justice is important, even noble. However, for those actions to result in the desired outcomes, educators must first be reconciled with their own self-identity—understanding what evokes emotion, awakens passion, and inspires a call to action. What truly matters to you, and what drives your behavior? This first chapter is designed to help you explore your identity.

Becoming a Social Justice Educator

Self-knowledge is foundational to the work of social justice educators. Exploring our own cultural influences and identities gives us insight into the frame through which we see the world—and how that frame

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also limits our view. The interactions we have with others who have a different frame often lead to misunderstandings between us. And our frame also informs how we perpetuate institutional and structural barriers that continue to do a disservice to children and communities. When others speak of dismantling systemic barriers, we must remember that we are a part of that system—and we may even unconsciously contribute to maintaining it. If we don't first identify who we are as we seek to cultivate a social justice mindset and then adjust our approach as needed, how can we possibly expect others to change?

What's "Culture," Anyway?

Traditional definitions of culture, the ones we learned in school, usually focus on the explicit and implicit patterns of behavior, language, symbols, and values that make groups different. We suppose that definition works in a historical sense, when it describes a geographically isolated group of people who never intermingled with anyone else, but in a world connected by modes of travel and telecommunications, the idea that a person is a member of only one culture doesn't really fit. Think of all the possible cultural influences inside this person:

> A fifteen-year-old cisgender boy growing up in Atlanta loves crunk music, practices his family's religion but has questions, and aspires to be a social media influencer. His parents, both physicians, don't support this dream. His grandparents fled Iran with their daughters in 1979 to escape the revolution. His grandparents speak Arabic. He knows a few words and phrases but has difficulty communicating deeply with them. When he goes with his parents to his grandparents' house, he enjoys *masgouf*, a traditional Iraqi dish. He also loves Mexican American food, especially the fish tacos his boyfriend introduced him to. He and his boyfriend keep their relationship secret from their families; however, they are "out" as a couple at their high school.

Could you ever assign a single "culture" to this adolescent? Our first cultural influences are usually derived from our families, but our perspective and identity continue to transform as we have more experiences and interact with others outside our family. Understanding the frame through which we see the world begins with looking at our own family experiences. How much warmth we experience in a family unit influences how we forge our respective self-identities (Benson & Johnson, 2009). In particular, the amount of conflict we experience among and between our family members—and our predisposition for coping with conflict—influences how we forge our self-identity. We are influenced by how our parents and guardians monitor and control our behavior

as children, and how our family treats us in relation to our siblings (Benson & Johnson, 2009).

Families tell stories from one generation to the next, and they immerse us in experiences that make up the fabric of who we are. Almost unconsciously, we identify with the heroes and sheroes of our family stories, and we connect with the comic and tragic figures of these stories. Families preserve and honor their culture through this oral tradition, preserving an intersectionality of culture through their familial biographical narratives. These unique narratives communicate how the family beliefs intersect with larger ethnic, racial, and gender narratives, to name a few, as well as the family's collective perspective on social justice issues.

> *Families tell stories from one generation to the next, and they immerse us in experiences that make up the fabric of who we are.*

Self-identity does not develop in a vacuum. Your self-identity has developed relative to your interactions with others, especially your family. As you continue your journey into social justice work, you must understand your cultural autobiography and how it influences your decision making.

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Pause and Ponder

Begin your own cultural autobiography with a reflection about your family of origin or your family of choice. Note that some of the questions may not apply to you, but we encourage you to consider each of them as a potential shaper of your identity.

QUESTION	REFLECTION	HOW HAS THIS IMPACTED YOUR SELF-IDENTITY?
When and where were you born?		
Where did you live between birth and age eighteen?		
Where did your parents or guardians grow up?		
Where did your grandparents or extended family or caregivers grow up?		

QUESTION	REFLECTION	HOW HAS THIS IMPACTED YOUR SELF-IDENTITY?
What events did you celebrate as a family growing up?		
When there was a big decision to make in your family, who participated? Was there anyone who had the final word in major decisions?		
As an adult, how are major decisions in your family made?		
As an adult, with whom do you discuss your thoughts and feelings? Why?		
As an adult, do you discuss your thoughts and feelings with people outside of your family?		

Intersectionality

Our cultural influences emanate from our family experiences, but they certainly do not end there. Our identity is further informed by our race, gender expression, sexuality, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nationality, citizenship, religion, and ability. This intersectionality of identities is simultaneously political and personal, and it speaks to our relative power (Crenshaw, 1989).

In the late 1980s, Kimberlé Crenshaw's pioneering work on race and gender issues challenged the dominant feminist movement of the time, which was oriented to the experiences of white women but offered little space for Black feminist thought. Crenshaw argued that by failing to see the role race plays in the experiences of Black women, oppressive systems continued unabated. Since that time, her seminal work on intersectionality has informed nearly every aspect of social justice work in legal, economic, and educational movements. Social justice efforts are piecemeal at best when we fail to address how intersectionality impacts discrimination, privilege, and the systemic barriers and affordances that thwart the dreams of some while giving the appearance of ease to others.

The intersectionality of identities means that we cannot separate the death of Breonna Taylor at the hands of police officers without accounting for her race and gender, her socioeconomic status, and her identities as a sister, daughter, friend, and EMT.

Similarly, we cannot understand the Dakota Access Pipeline protests without accounting for the historical traumas of Native Americans. We also have to understand the power imbalance between multinational corporations and the people who live on the land, and the activism of twelve-year-old Tokata Iron Eyes, who started the ReZpect Our Water movement and stated, "They're not the ones being affected. So why should they get to make the decisions?"

Now that you've created a cultural autobiography pertaining to your family history, we'll help you explore the concept of racial identity—your own as well as experiences that have shaped your perceptions.

Racial Identity

The individual and collective experiences of this group of authors led us to want to explore and share our ideas for becoming social justice educators. We explore the current intentional and unintentional biases and practices that impact the social-emotional and academic lives of students. And in doing so, we have discussed the impact these practices have had on specific groups. In that discussion, we have had to use terms to define large groups of racial/ethnic groups.

We have chosen to use the terms *Latino/a* and *Black* for two such groups. As we discuss in this book, the labels and words we choose to

represent ideas, concepts, and people are important. We understand that some people would prefer that we use different terms to describe these racial/ethnic groups. We hope that you understand that we are aware of the limitations of the various terms. For example, Oscar and Sarah identify more with their families' countries of origin (Colombia and Mexico, respectively) rather than a broader category that encompasses a larger group of people with a shared language, and presumably shared culture. We also recognize that "shared language" isn't even sufficient to bind these countries together, because Portuguese, French, the Indigenous language of Nahuatl, and many more languages serve as the means of communication from Mexico to the tip of Chile.

In our discussions and writings, we have chosen to use the term *Black* instead of *African American* for several reasons, drawing on a range of personal, historical, cultural, and social factors. Our decision was influenced by the fact that some individuals may prefer one term over another based on their unique experiences and connections to their cultural identity. The historical context of the terms also played a role, as the term *African American* emerged in the late 20th century as an alternative to *Black*. While some individuals might feel a stronger connection to the term *African American* due to its emphasis on their ancestral ties to Africa, others may prefer the term *Black* for its historical significance in the civil rights movement and Black Power movement. Additionally, we recognized that the term *Black* can be seen as a more inclusive, broader racial category that encompasses people of African descent from various countries and cultures. Generational and regional differences also factored into our decision, as preferences for one term over another can vary by age group and geographic location. We considered that some individuals might choose one term over another to make a political or social statement or express solidarity with a particular movement or cause. Ultimately, our choice to use the term *Black* was based on a thoughtful consideration of these diverse perspectives and factors.

We also use the term *Asian American*, but we recognize that many of our colleagues also identify more closely with their family's country of origin. This decision is based on an understanding of the complex interplay of personal, historical, cultural, and social factors that influence individuals' self-identification. For some, using the term *Asian American* provides a sense of collective identity and solidarity that spans various nationalities and cultures within the broader Asian continent. However, we recognize that others may prefer to emphasize their specific cultural heritage and connections to their family's country of origin, as it allows for a more precise representation of their unique experiences and traditions. In this context, generational differences, regional differences, and personal preferences can all play a role in shaping an individual's choice of identification. Additionally, the term *Asian American* may be seen as a way to challenge the "model minority" stereotype and promote solidarity

among diverse Asian communities in the United States. By using the term *Asian American*, while also acknowledging the varying ways our colleagues may identify, we strive to create an inclusive and respectful environment that acknowledges the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of those we engage with.

Have you ever analyzed the experiences that have impacted your own racial identity?

The terms that we have chosen to use are connected to our personal life experiences and backgrounds, but these terms are in no way intended to marginalize or isolate. Instead, our focus is on our shared responsibility to create an educational system that allows all voices to be valued, and spaces to be created for all students to use their unique talents and strengths to leave their positive impact on this world.

Have you ever analyzed the experiences that have impacted your own racial identity? Further, have you considered that how we come to know things has implications for racial self-identity and how we think about issues of social justice (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2014)? Constructive developmental theorists say there are four ways of knowing:

◗ **Instrumental.** People with this orientation see the world through a concrete right-or-wrong lens. They engage in little perspective taking.

◗ **Socializing.** People with this orientation hold the belief that there is no one right way to see the world. They engage in more perspective taking relative to personal ideals.

◗ **Self-authoring.** This orientation describes people who value taking the perspective of others to understand their thoughts and feelings, who order these values by importance, and who take action on others' thoughts and feelings relative to their own judgments.

◗ **Self-transforming.** People with this orientation open their thinking and identities to continual reflection and development, and they collaboratively reflect and explore alternatives.

Regardless of how you've come to "know" and see the world, knowing yourself is integral to becoming a social justice educator. We each have to reconcile—and sometimes confront—life experiences we have had and how those experiences shape our attitudes about race and race group membership. When we reconcile the race-based interactions in our lives and how they influence our behavior, we may see that some of our beliefs are in opposition to the goal of behaving more justly to the

children whom we teach and to those who teach them. This reconciliation may also reveal beliefs that undermine behaving more justly toward students' families and our colleagues, who are equally responsible for our students' education.

Further, this reconciliation may show us that we aren't always aware of how our belief systems—and resulting behaviors from them—can sometimes be in opposition to and undermine social justice. Understanding this can help us take action and advocate for others, including those who may have identities that differ from our own.

> *Reconciliation of race-based interactions is one of several important steps in becoming a more socially just educator.*

Reconciliation of race-based interactions is one of several important steps in becoming a more socially just educator. We all need to understand our racial autobiographies to more easily identify implicit bias and microaggressions, reduce stereotype threat, and create safe places for our students and colleagues to learn.

All of us have been shaped by our ancestors in some way. Sometimes, that influence is painful to discuss. As an example, Dominique remembers an incident in which his dad, who is Fijian, was stopped by the police in a suburban part of the town where they live. The officer asked where his dad was visiting from and said they didn't get a lot of Black Americans in that part of town. Dominque's dad has driven very cautiously ever since, and he continues to warn his children about their interactions with the police.

Zachary remembers a "community" swimming pool in his hometown that had an unspoken rule: Black people were not allowed to swim there. To swim at that pool, you had to be a "member" of the community organization or get "invited" by a current member to join. The swimming pool was surrounded by a tall fence, and the membership of the community swimming pool seemed to be exclusively white, though the neighborhood where the swimming pool was located was diverse. Zachary saw the swimming pool almost every time he or his family drove somewhere because the pool was adjacent to a major throughway, which was named after the confederate Battle of Big Bethel, one of the earliest land battles in the Civil War. For years, Zachary never saw a person of color inside the gates of that pool.

Both of these types of experiences, and thousands more, shape our views. Unless we analyze them and put them to the equity test, we might think that other people are less than or more deserving than us, depending on our positional power. Again, a good first step to viewing these situations clearly is to use a self-transforming perspective to view these situations and to understand our own racial autobiography.

Pause and Ponder

Start with your racial autobiography bookends.

What can you recall about the earliest and most recent events and conversations about race, race relations, and/or racism that may have impacted your current perspectives and/or experiences?

- Earliest: What was your first personal experience in dealing with race or racism? Describe what happened.

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- Most Recent: Describe your most recent personal experience in dealing with race or racism. Describe what happened.

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To help you think about the time between your earliest and most recent racial experiences, jot down notes to answer the following questions (adapted from Singleton, 2021). Let the questions guide but not limit your thinking. Note any other memories or ideas that seem relevant to you. When you have identified some of the landmarks on your racial journey, start writing your racial autobiography. Remember that it is a fluid document, one that you will reflect on and update many times as your racial consciousness evolves.

1. **Family**

   ▶ Are your parents or guardians the same race? Same ethnic group? Are your brothers and sisters? What about your extended family (uncles, aunts, etc.)?

◗ Where did your parents or guardians grow up? What exposure did they have to racial groups other than their own? (Have you ever talked with them about this?)

◗ What ideas did they grow up with regarding race relations? (Do you know? Have you ever talked with them about this? Why or why not?)

◗ Do you think of yourself as white? As Black? As African American? As Asian American? As Latina/o? As Hispanic? As Native American? As Indigenous? Or just as "human"? Do you think of yourself as a member of an ethnic group? If so, what is its importance to you?

2. **Neighborhood**

◗ What is the racial makeup of the neighborhood you grew up in?

◗ What was your first awareness of race (that is, when did you realize that there are different "races" and that you are a member of a racial group)?

◗ What was your first encounter with another race? Describe the situation.

◗ When and where did you first hear racial slurs?

◗ What messages about race do you recall getting from your parents or guardians? From others when you were little?

3. **Elementary and Middle School**

◗ What was the racial makeup of your elementary school? Of its teachers?

◗ Think about the curriculum: What African Americans did you hear about? How did you celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day? What about Asians, Latinas/os, or Native Americans?

◗ Cultural influences (TV, advertisements, novels, music, movies, etc.): What color God was presented to you? Angels? Santa Claus? The tooth fairy? Dolls?

◗ What was the racial makeup of organizations you were in (Girl Scouts, soccer team, church, etc.)?

4. **High School and Community**

◗ What was the racial makeup of your high school? Of its teachers?

◗ Was there interracial dating? How was interracial dating perceived by the people around you?

◗ Were racial slurs used? Were there conflicts between races?

◗ Have you ever felt or been stigmatized because of your race or ethnic group membership?

◗ What else was important about your high school years, racially speaking (maybe something that didn't happen in high school but during that time)?

◗ What is the racial makeup of your hometown? Of your metropolitan area? What about your experiences in summer camp, summer jobs, and so on?

5. **Present and Future**

◗ What is the racial makeup of the organization you currently work in? Of your circle(s) of friends?

◗ When you think about where you want to live in the future (if that's different from where you are now), what is its racial makeup? Social class makeup? Where do you want to work in the next ten years? What is its racial makeup? Social class makeup?

6. **General**

◗ What is the most important image, encounter, or thought you've had regarding race? Have you felt threatened? Have you ever felt in the minority? Have you felt privileged?

The Power in Names

One of the first of countless decisions parents make is naming a child. They consider things like what the name might rhyme with because of teasing. They consider all the people with whom they have interacted, and when one partner suggests a name, the other thinks about whether it brings up any painful memories. Parents ask themselves if the name has positive or negative connotations, and they contemplate if it represents their culture and family.

This team of authors has a lot of experience with choosing names (five times as of this writing). For example, Dominique's son's name is Nixon. Immediately, people assume that Dominique named his son after the thirty-seventh president of the United States. That can sometimes translate into a false perception of who Dominique and his family might be. Some individuals do not support President Nixon or his values, and they assume Dominique shares those values. This shouldn't happen, but it does. The fact is, there is a watch company based in California called Nixon. It is the watch brand that Dominique wears daily, and each time he looks at his watch, it serves as a reminder to make time for his son.

Small but hurtful interactions can happen often because of a name. Let's take Dominique's name as another example. If you haven't met him or viewed his photo, there is a chance that you might have thought he was a woman because some believe Dominique is a "female" name. Dominique can recall every interaction when someone mispronounced his name after being introduced, calling him Dominick instead. He has no issue with anyone mispronouncing his name initially—that happens. However, he has come to realize that when someone still mispronounces his name after multiple interactions, he checks out of the conversation. Dominique's disinterest in those who appear to *choose* to mispronounce his name doesn't stem from a place of disrespect. Rather, Dominque feels that the other person is not invested in getting to know him. He can also remember every teacher who changed his name because they couldn't get it right. They created *Dominic*, *Dom*, and *D*, letting Dominique and his identity fade away. Instead of trying to change themselves, they chose to try to change Dominique.

This harmful approach happens daily within schools. Students with names that are difficult for speakers to pronounce get nicknames, shortened names, or even completely different names. How many times have we been in this position as a student? How many times have we done this as a teacher? In reflection, have we gotten upset with a student because they were disengaged? Might they have disengaged partly because we kept saying their name incorrectly—perhaps without even realizing it—resulting in a student who didn't feel important?

Nomenclature—what we call things—matters.

How we name things influences how we think about them. The technical term for this is *linguistic relativity* (Lucy, 1997). Josephine Livingstone (2014) reminds us of a central idea from the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf: "All observers are not led by the physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar." For instance, the images and emotions evoked for Zachary by the words *refugee* and *political prisoner* or from a name such as *Queen* or *Debo* may be very different for people with a different linguistic background or racial socialization than Zachary.

Some may judge the parents and their values based on the names they give children, and others may recognize the tradition of unique names in the Black community (e.g., Logan, 2020). Nomenclature—what we call things—matters. Words generate thoughts, and thoughts are the fertile ground from which behaviors grow. In becoming a social justice educator, you must be conscious of how the names you give to people, places, and things—let alone how you say them—support just behavior and fundamental fairness for all or undermine it.

Pause and Ponder

Your name reflects your identity, and in many cases it tells something about your own origin story. Family members may have told you how you got your name. Were you named for an ancestor or a friend of your parents who meant so much to them? You might have been named after a celebrity or a television character. Or maybe your parents just liked the sound of the name. For example, all of us who have worked on this book have our own stories.

Zachary: Named after the priest and prophet Zechariah in the Old Testament of the Bible

Dominique: Named after basketball star Dominique Wilkins

Sarah: Named after the biblical figure in the Old Testament meaning *princess* in Hebrew

Oscar: Named after fashion designer Oscar de la Renta and salsa singer Oscar D'León

Bryan: Not named after anyone; his mom wanted a name that couldn't be shortened

What's yours? _____

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What assumptions do people make about you when they hear or read your name for the first time? Which assumptions are positive? Which are negative? Is there an instance where assumptions based on your name prevented you from doing something? Did your name open a door for you?

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The Dominant Culture of Schools and the Ideal of Discourse and Dissent

Schools also have their own culture, and while there are differences between schools that make each one unique, most operate similarly. Schools in the United States tend to privilege an individualistic, competitive approach. (Consider how grades are awarded, honor rolls are determined, and class rankings are reported.) This approach teaches that property is owned by an individual, and the physical world is knowable (Trumbull et al., 2000). Education is framed as a means to become upwardly mobile to create a more materialistically enriched future. (Consider the assumption that all students should strive to attend college.) This agenda has become even more pointed in the last two decades as postsecondary liberal arts education programs close while science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs grow at high rates (Shamir, 2020).

> *Schools in the United States tend to privilege an individualistic, competitive approach.*

In contrast to these Anglo-Saxon Protestant institutional values of schools, some cultures hold a more collectivist view of the world. Success is defined more often at the group level, and the group's interdependency relies on its members' social skills. This sets some children up for difficulty when they move to the United States from another country and suddenly need to navigate a school culture that is unlike the one they experienced at home. For example, in an article titled "Why I'm Not Involved," Jung-Ah Choi (2017), a U.S. education professor who grew up in South Korea, recounted her dismay and humiliation at her son's kindergarten conference. The teacher told Choi her son was disruptive. As Choi noted,

> I expected to have a conversation with the teacher. I expected the teacher to ask questions about Michael's family life. I expected a true parent-teacher partnership for the benefit of his education. I expected the teacher to take an interest in my approach to raising Michael. But all I heard from his teachers—that year and the next—was information about where he stood on the spectrum from struggling to smart and where he stood on the obedience spectrum (from disruptive to respectful). . . . "Mommy," he told me in kindergarten, "I am in the bad behavior group at school." (p. 48)

Her frustration is well founded. How can teachers know about a child's culture if communication is one way and focused only on the dominant culture of the school?

Social justice educators, administrators, and families should not view the dominant culture of a school as permanent, particularly if that culture does not meet the educational needs of all students. Those who insist on

social justice and fair education for all students can dissent when schools fail to meet the needs of students. Schools typically mirror the ideals of a society. Education systems are the vehicle that reproduces societal culture (Mathews & Savarimuthu, 2020).

Marginalized students need social justice champions who advocate for their right to a free and appropriate public education. Social justice educators must find ways to dissent from cultural norms that undermine learning and justice for groups of students. Discourse and productive dissent are fundamental to a democratic society. How else are those governed by policies and laws expected to share their thoughts on how decisions impact them? The framers of the U.S. Constitution institutionalized the ideal of discourse and dissent in the First Amendment when they penned the notion that the public must protest against the state if it behaves unjustly. This protest is defined by discourse and dissent.

Marginalized students need social justice champions who advocate for their right to a free and appropriate public education.

As social justice educators, we cannot be indifferent to decisions or decision-making processes that impact us or the people we care for, specifically our students and their families. We can discuss, share dissenting views, and disagree without being disagreeable. Admittedly, this has not been modeled very well at school board meetings throughout the country, especially during discussions about race, ethnicity, and inclusion. Still, discourse and dissent are fundamental to democratic processes, and the officials who make decisions about schools must balance the interests of the community and the needs of all children. These discussions surface a community's values. Through discourse and dissent in our schools, at school board meetings, and embedded in reporting about education in the news, and through the ratification of education policies, our intersectionality impacts how we decide what's important and what values dominate the culture of our community's schools.

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Pause and Ponder

How was education discussed in your family? Reflect on the values imparted to you about schooling. Did your school regularly communicate with your family? What were the expectations your school held for your family? Did you experience a difference in values between home and school?

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The Rich Points

Social justice educators recognize the profound influence culture and identities have on our perceptions and actions. We are often the product of multiple cultures, rather than a single one. Anthropologist Michael Agar (2006) offered this thought experiment in one of his talks.

What if I . . .

1. went to college in the 1980s rather than the 1960s?

2. were female rather than male?

3. grew up Jewish rather than Catholic?

4. were raised in Mississippi rather than California?

5. were a native speaker of Spanish rather than English?

6. delivered a sales pitch rather than a lecture?

Would any of these differences have been noticed? (p. 3)

Yes, it is highly likely that these differences would have been noticed and would have likely impacted the experiences he had in college. Agar calls this noticing of differences on the part of listeners the "rich points." These rich points include moments of confusion that you may experience when you talk with someone and realize that you don't understand

something they have said. They are rich because they hold a wealth of information about both parties. When those rich points occur, you find yourself at a crossroads and must make one of three decisions:

◗ Ignore your lack of understanding and hope you'll reach a point where it makes sense again

◗ Attribute your lack of understanding to a shortcoming on the speaker's part

◗ Wonder why you don't understand and see it as an opportunity to know more about yourself through the other party

Unfortunately, the first two options occur all too frequently. But importantly, the third decision can't happen if you don't have a sense of your own identity and how it impacts and limits your understanding of the world.

Each of us has an intersectionality of identities that inform how we see ourselves and others. Those frames are, at times, highly aligned with others. In those cases, you share a similar background and set of experiences with some people, and your communication with them is effortless. You rarely have those moments of lost understanding. But in other cases, your frame differs from those with whom you interact. This can be especially true if you teach at a school where the students' experiences are not like yours.

Teachers may also experience generational differences between themselves, their students, and their professional colleagues. In fact, generational differences surfaced for us while writing this book. Our author group consists of a Baby Boomer, two members of Generation X, and two Millennials. We learned more about each other through reading each other's writing and examining social justice concepts from our varying perspectives. The diversity of our perspectives provides rich points of insight for us as authors, and we are thankful we can share our thoughts with you. The concepts in this book deepened our understanding of each other and ourselves. We hope you have the same experience.

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Pause and Ponder

How do you respond when your frame differs from those around you? What is it like for you to explore the richness of those differences? Think of a time when you lost understanding with someone. How did you chase a rich point? Reflect on an interaction you had with someone of a different generation than your own. What was confusing to you? How did you respond to your confusion?

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Conclusion

Knowing ourselves requires a self-awareness and a self-consciousness that not only benefit our personal well-being but also shape our ability to impact the social, emotional, and academic learning of students. In our pursuit of becoming social justice educators, we examine how our self-identity has developed. We consider the complexities in the intersectionality of identities, including how racial identities have contributed to our perspectives and our frame of the world. We recognize that our own names and the words we choose as labels for people and ideas matter because of the associated connotations. We encourage the practice of analyzing the dominant culture of the school and its alignment to the values and culture of the students who learn within its walls. As social justice educators, we search for the "rich points" when communicating with students, families, and colleagues so that we can deepen our understanding of others and, in turn, grow our understanding of ourselves.

3-2-1 Chapter Reflection

Take an opportunity to think about the content of the chapter and what it means to you.

- What are three important ideas from this chapter?

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- What are two action steps you can take based on this chapter?

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- What is one idea or concept you would like to explore further?

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