So What? Dialogue about the Limits of Teacher Educators and their Curriculum

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In the spring of 2022, we (Vanessa and Jody) created a cross-institutional book club, inviting both undergraduate and graduate students, practicing and pre-service teachers, to join. Prior to these group meetings, we had spent time studying group literacy structures (Beach & Yussen, 2011; Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Burns, 1998; Cantrell, 2002; Daniels, 2002; McGinley et al., 2000; Scharber, 2009; Twomey, 2007) in coursework, and we had found that the element of sociopolitical consciousness raising (Ladson-Billings, 2006) had been a salient outcome of these groups, especially when the texts selected were compelling reads around historic and contemporary injustices in educational settings. We intended to continue and extend this work by reading texts that were not specifically about the education system but were instead about the other social and political systems that surround and intersect with schools. We wondered what types of sociopolitical consciousness raising would happen when teachers were encountering texts that were not specifically about teaching. We chose two texts: *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond (2016) and *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, From Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* by Marc Lamont Hill (2017). We both had read these ethnographic, historical works. They are riveting texts, going straight at issues we felt were tangential to what we encounter in classrooms. As scholars, these are often the kinds of books that help us think more holistically and critically about educational issues that we address with teachers. The next step seemed logical: continue collaborative group literacy work with different kinds of texts and continue to learn about why those texts matter to teachers.

This essay shares the story of the book club briefly, but primarily, we pivot to share our personal and curricular responses to the book club in the role of leaders and professors. It turns out that, in this instance, the story was not really about the book club and the meetings; it was about us and our perceptions of the role we play in sociopolitical consciousness raising. We encountered a group of critically oriented teachers who were, like us, not new to any of the sociopolitical systems that touch education; they see the lived realities of issues attached to public services, money, and housing clearly in their teaching lives. They were already adept at considering the role of social power and institutional systems applied unequally to the outcomes of children in schools. They already read the world of school inequality and vulnerability (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Yet, we met together each week faithful to the texts, the process, and each other. In short, as professors of pre-professional teachers, we are often introducing sociopolitical consciousness raising (Ladson-Billings, 2006). But as we reflected in our first meeting about the book clubs, Jody asserted:

> In [the previous studies], I really was not *in* the group, *in* the conversation. I was able to view it from an outside/insider gaze. I knew the content (certainly, I was the *expert!!*), and I was able to swoop in and comment at the end, act as an overseer,

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> seize the power dynamic. I was not *of* those conversations. This is going to be different, and it will likely be uncomfortable. I am urging myself to *lean in*. And to *chill*.

This was a conflict that we both felt as we engaged with the book club and throughout processing the meetings, as data, in our intentional dialogue with each other. Rather than evade this tension, we engaged in intentional dialogue during the summer of 2022 and began to examine the book club experience and our role as teachers through the lens of curriculum theory. Using *currere* (Pinar, 1975) as our guide, we went through a process of self-understanding, uncovering our own curricular experiences as practicing teachers and junior professors, connecting those experiences to the future and the present, and eventually landing in a hopeful place of *becoming*, where Pinar (1975) says, "[We are] placed together" (p. 13). Ultimately, we are still reading together and recommitting to the *becoming*, despite our impatience with the process.

Taking a critical pedagogical stance (hooks, 1994) in our teaching has always been work for us in our classes. We are both grounded in the idea that part of teacher preparation is acknowledging that teaching is political (Kincheloe, 2008), and we have commitments to preparing teachers in culturally relevant education so that they are prepared to contend with and ultimately address "sociocultural issues emanating from society and affecting our schools" (Aronson & Laughter, 2016, p. 200.) It is gratifying really, in our work as professors. Each semester, bright-eyed students enter our classrooms, and we get to talk about critical pedagogy in a foundational way. Creating this book club felt like another opportunity to engage with our students in this foundational work.

After the first book club meeting, though, we both knew this experience would be different from our every-semester encounters in our classrooms. The members of this book group did not need the foundational work. They were already there. We had spent years in our classrooms and with our colleagues bringing others along. Often, we speak of critical engagement, of anti-racism, as a journey, as a progression. We had spent time further along on this progression than those we had encountered in our institutional contexts. We immediately knew, though, that this book club was different.

Conversations were dynamic; in our initial debrief about the meetings, the fear that accompanies a group of strangers meeting to talk about injustices in education was almost immediately dispelled. "We were prepared for the awkwardness of the first meeting," we debriefed. Based on class experiences where the curriculum often butts up against norms of neutrality—which generates awkwardness when social norms are disrupted—this book club moved past that phase quickly. Vanessa said, "no one here is new," and Jody reflected, "I probably don't have anything to teach anybody in this. I mean maybe. But that's not my job. I'm not the teacher—I'm *of* it. … They are on the road."

The Book Club

This particular book club was organized cross-institutionally. Both institutions identify as Catholic in their teaching and missions, one Marianist and the other Jesuit. We invited undergraduate and graduate students to join in a book club about the sociopolitical systems that impact the lives of children and families served in

schools. Five students: three graduate students, one non-traditional undergraduate, and one second-career graduate education student joined us each week for five weeks. On average, we missed one person each book club session, but no one dropped out of attendance. Of the seven participants, five were either prepared as, preparing for, or are active social studies content teachers. The two remaining participants are generalists who expressed interest in history or policy. We advertised widely but certainly caught a niche in teacher education. All meetings were held on a video meeting platform in the spring 2022 semester, and all meetings were recorded per Institutional Review Board approval. Participants were not supervising nor teaching any students during the semester that we met but had been in teacher-student relationships with Jody or Vanessa in the past. Meetings were approximately one hour long.

After completing the book club meetings and considering the ways that we might report or story findings of sociopolitical consciousness raising, of which there were a few, we felt unsettled in our decision making as teachers and scholars. Rather than telling a story about how teachers, who were already socially and politically attuned before reading, continued to name and reiterate the prevalence and reality of state violence, we wondered, "If there is nothing new here, then what is here?" As curriculum scholars, we hoped that what Pinar (2019) promises is true: "Curriculum theory can help" (p. vii). Rather than evaluating the objective of our study and measuring the effectiveness of the implementation of sociopolitical consciousness raising, we instead turned to the book club as curriculum and dug deeper into "what it means to teach, to study, to become 'educated' in the present historical moment" (Pinar, 2019, p. vii). What we hope to present here is a better understanding of curriculum that is not introductory with clear demarcations of "before and after" sociopolitical consciousness raising, but consistently and continually *learning* as we critically engage with a dynamic and complicated landscape of education. We share here the results of "*complicated conversations*" (Pinar, 2019, p. vii) about sociopolitical consciousness raising curriculum with engaged and politically active participants.

Data analysis for this project took place as duo-ethnographic dialogue (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) between the two researchers over the course of two weeks. Both of us revisited researcher journals kept during the spring 2022 semester, reviewed written notes from weekly debriefing sessions, and rewatched all five hours of the book club meetings synchronously. To capture the dialogue between us, we recorded our conversations while we rewatched the meetings. Next, both researchers began reading individually about the themes and big ideas that we wanted more academic theory to support—namely, sociopolitical consciousness raising as a journey, a process, and a non-destination. Finally, during the process of writing vignettes and reflective stories for this essay, we reread the dialogue transcripts for big ideas and meaning making across meetings and between ourselves and our own sensemaking.

Vanessa –

I attended a teacher preparation program as an undergraduate to teach in elementary grades. As a student, I was open to learning whatever the experts taught me. As a first-generation college student, I had seen teachers. I knew what they did. I thought I could emulate that, and I was eager to learn from experts. Education was, after all, the key to my individual success. But there was a social studies preparation methods class that interrupted the flow of knowledge from the professor to my brain. From the beginning

of that class, we were assigned books that didn't teach methods; they were exemplar texts about building community and bringing democracy to life in the classroom. What was that about? I was there to learn how to *do* teaching not how to be political. You were either born Republican or Democrat; you inherited it like the division between Ford and Chevy. Of course, America is a democracy. Why did that need to be repeated so often?

I have distinct, if not assuredly accurate, memories of being baffled as to why I had a professor who returned repeatedly to democratic life as central to classroom living and social studies instruction. Was it really our job to teach our politics? Wasn't democracy *explicitly* politics? That's not what any teacher of mine ever did. So much of my K-12 education did not prepare me to see beyond the knowledge provided. Read the chapter and answer the questions at the end of the book. If I got the answer right according to the author of the book, I was rewarded with As (credentials) and sometimes a dinger (a gumball wrapped in a lollipop shell) by my government teacher.

The book was written by an expert. I was not an expert.

Jody –

I have spent time in recent years, especially since I began my career in the Academy, considering the past—the environment in which I grew up, what I learned both explicitly and implicitly about *life*, specifically the systems and forces that played a substantial, but silent, part in how I was socialized and came to be. As a young person, it seems, I inherently gravitated towards sociopolitical, justice-oriented issues. Government was my favorite class, and I majored in political science. In these spaces, in ways I cannot explain, I remember having a very strong notion, a pull, a *knowing* of what was just, what was *right*. I simply knew, in my bones. My knowing did not necessarily align with my environment, though, nor with my family's beliefs, nor with my schooling. In those early years, though, I just *knew*.

I can see a version of my younger self in so many of my students now. My upbringing was insulated and siloed. It included just a narrow slice of the world, and it took me years to understand there was so much more, despite those early pulls. In those days, I would not have considered criticizing the education system, as it was (and is) a system that I had (and have) learned how to access and manipulate to meet my needs. Uncovering systems of power that directly benefit me took some time to fully materialize.

In *currere*, Pinar (1975) calls on curriculum scholars to examine their own biographies, their biographic situations, both past and present, to narrate their lived experiences, their educational experiences. We (Vanessa and Jody) wanted to delve into our biographic pasts—the "regressive"—to "hold the photograph in front of [ourselves, to] stud[y] the detail" (p. 9). How did our past experiences in school, experiences with sociopolitical consciousness and knowledge, impact who we are now, who we are as scholars and professors, as we interact with teachers and colleagues in dialogue? Vanessa's experience as a first-generation college student, one that was steeped in meritocratic values and immersed in the banking system of education is revealed in her early interactions and dialogue around the political, the democratic. Jody's experiences, as a student who learned implicitly how to navigate and leverage systems of power, but who was instinctively pulled towards an opposing ideological stance from her environment, reveals an early naivete, a compliance of sorts to the culture of power.

As we spent time in dialogue, examining the data from the book club meetings, we surfaced these regressive memories. These memories, and others, "hover over the present" (Pinar, 1975, p. 6) in a way that forced us to reconsider how it is that we encounter our work of sociopolitical consciousness-raising, how we have bridged the act of *knowing* to *noticing*. Ladson-Billings (2006) points out that many "teachers have not developed a sociopolitical consciousness of their own" (p. 37). She continues, "True, most hold strong opinions about the sociopolitical issues they know about, but many do not know much about sociopolitical issues" (p. 37). As aforementioned, we had spent the last few years immersed in studying sociopolitical consciousness-raising in our research. When we examined our own biographies, we found that, in our younger years, we were not much different from the many students we were encountering in our roles as teacher educators, but we had emerged out of that place at some point, at least a little. When we considered the progressive—how our wonderings might influence our present (Pinar, 1975)—we troubled the notion of *knowing* vs. *noticing* and if we had enacted, or could enact, the work in sociopolitical consciousness-raising that we had so deeply desired, moving from *knowing* to *noticing,* and perhaps beyond.

Vanessa –

I have been researching reading groups and their outcomes for about four years now. I have created and participated in reading groups about social justice, activism, feminism, and anti-racism. I have spent time reading with preservice teachers, teacher educators, and university colleagues. Whereas I once looked towards books as a site of mirrors, windows, and doors with idealistic optimism (Sims Bishop, 1990), in Spring 2022, I was increasingly drawn to the final points that Sims Bishop (1990) makes in her seminal article about the potential of multicultural children's books:

> literature, no matter how powerful, has its limits. It won't take the homeless off our streets; it won't feed the starving of the world; it won't stop people from attacking each other because of our racial differences; it won't stamp out the scourge of drugs. (p. xi)

In the spring, as we met for the book club, we were talking explicitly about vulnerable people made vulnerable by the ways that the state, via policy, fails to protect children and their families (Hill, 2017). As teachers, we are explicitly members of the state, accredited by the state, credentialed by the state—and so the language of state violence felt immediate and implicating. In early March, I stepped away from the accreditation process of the elementary education program to contemplate the book club and the scope and limits of reading in my journal:

> *I have been thinking about Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), which ultimately theorizes that, when we encounter texts, we don't just encounter a text; we encounter ourselves somehow. Sims Bishop (1990) wrote about mirrors, doors, and windows as a metaphor for encountering books. Looking into the mirror is what I think readers do with texts: written, visual, multimodal, etc… I don't think the text does anything other than provide a new angle on the mirror. Then we tell stories about ourselves, to ourselves, to others, and then other texts (other people) hold up new mirrors to ourselves. I believe there could be an infinite number of*

> *mirrors to see ourselves and our world. Because it's not just looking at ourselves—it's looking at the forest; it's how we fit into a bigger picture. We are seeing the world, but we are increasingly seeing ourselves in the world.*

This is where I feel like I cross the boundary between wanting written expression and wanting art. I want an immersive visual experience that conveys this idea better than I can in writing. A room full of mirrors—ceiling, floor, wall to wall. But the mirrors are broken. No, the mirrors are small circular discs that capture only parts of the room at a given point in time. Each mirror is a surface to reflect the larger context, but not one mirror can show all of it. So, we witness, we look, we look again, we look again, and again, and again until we see ourselves and our bigger picture, our context. And I don't feel like we need a different book/piece of art every time. Because every day I return to a mirror, I see an older woman and an older world. Maybe one minute, one day. But time is a dimension that creates an ever-changing world to see and witness.

So why do we read? The book is never the point—except for the author. The reader is the point. But the point of reading is not to be a solo reader. Because there needs to be some kind of dimension to the art that grounds us in order to see. We cannot consider just a room full of mirrors and only ourselves to see. We have to see more and more and more. Maybe behind me is a rolling screen of places, faces, engagements—encountered in multimodal texts that shape what contextualizes me. The more this virtual screen moves, the more I see. The more I engage with texts, the more I see. The texts can be real/not real. They are the literacy of my life. The more I engage with what I cannot imagine on my own, the more I witness.

I was dissatisfied with my stagnant image of myself, with the world moving around me. I think I wanted to be active. I began to consider, is knowing enough?

> *Why are we reading these two books together? We aren't really opening our eyes/consciousness, raising ideas/concepts/injustices that are new to any members of this book club. So why read it? Why do I read it all?*

I began to consider, inspired by another writer: Glennon Doyle (2020):

> *Glennon Doyle says—the longer you are a philanthropist, if you are thinking at all, you will become an activist. Otherwise, staying in the philanthropist space is to be a co-conspirator with systems of power that continue to generate opportunities for philanthropy.*

Is reading in a book club—especially with this group of people—academic philanthropy?

Jody –

At one point during our debriefing, both Vanessa and I finally voiced what both of us had inherently known but were apprehensive to say out loud, for fear of the *what now* in our study: the stories we were reading about in both *Nobody* and *Evicted* were about issues we *knew* about, and so did our participants. We were aware of the issues of insecure housing, of the corruption of our criminal justice system, of the racism that influences infrastructure and economic decisions in our society. We *knew* all of this, and so did all the members of our book club. And in this book club, my role was not to

share this knowing with others, as I so often do as a teacher. The question turned from a *knowing* to a *noticing*.

During one of our debriefing sessions, we considered the idea of knowing, the understanding that political and cultural and societal forces often plant themselves into our bones and our veins and into our beings in ways that don't allow us to see things clearly, to actually *notice* what is happening around us. It happens frequently, and it was a part of the experiences of the members of our book group as well. We *knew* all of these things. But did we ever *notice* it? Walking away from the book club, I couldn't help but wonder, what do we do when we realize that knowing is simply not enough, that we need to also *notice*?

The *New York Times* ran a story in the summer of 2022 about a school district in New Hampshire (Barry, 2022). Essentially, people in a small town in New Hampshire had stopped "showing up" for the democratic process in their community. They *knew* that participation was important. They *knew* what was important to them as a community. But they stopped *noticing*, *showing up*. When they stopped *noticing*, they stopped actively participating, and the town's three-person select committee cut the community's school budget by about half at an under-attended community meeting. The cuts were actions that the majority of the community did not agree with, nor support. While this story is interesting and important in the greater landscape of school policy, it is the scenario of informed, yet inactive, citizenry that drew me to the story. In our reading group, we discovered that *knowing* was not enough. We recognized that we also needed to intentionally engage in the work of enacting justice in the democratic spaces that are our classrooms and our community.

The book club, for me, was an experience that very boldly, and very clearly, caused me to question my work as a teacher, as a teacher educator, and as an active and informed participant in democracy. I had been resting in a place of *knowing*. I had become complacent, maybe even stuck in an illusion that my work was more meaningful and impactful than it truly is, that I was *doing* something through my work to engage preservice teachers in the work of democracy. The book club showed me that *knowing* is not enough.

Horton and Freire (1990) write, "The more people become themselves, the better the democracy" (p. 145). This was an opportunity to become *ourselves* for all participants—for the graduate students and ourselves. Attention to the teacher is often forfeited to the role of the student, but a critical pedagogue has to always try to be both. "There is no teaching without learning" (Freire, 1998, p. 29). After this experience, we asked, *Who are we? What is the contribution of our scholarly and professional work to who we are as educators, teachers, and citizens?* (Pinar, 1975, p. 12). The book club, which unabashedly troubled issues around money, infrastructure, criminal justice, incarceration, and more, illuminated our deep knowledge of the injustice that surrounds us, that we are embedded in. But in our work as teacher educators, were we simply passing along the knowing? Or were we giving our students the tools to begin *noticing*, and then, in turn, acting. Vanessa's connection to Glennon Doyle's (2020) assertion that philanthropy can be transformed to activism resonated with us.

In courses, we hope that we are supporting teachers as they learn to critically read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), consider the role of power in outcomes for children in schools and social and political spaces, and apply their knowledge of power

to their professional work in schools. In other words, schools are both our site of study as well as a site of real-world application (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Our experience in this book club, more specifically in the conversations between the two of us in the months following the book club, caused us to examine these desired outcomes in our teacher education courses and how we accomplish those goals.

So What?

In our curriculum, we lean heavily on books and the conversation that follows. We know that the act of reading *might* expose the reader something they did not know before. We hope that stories humanize our own experiences and the experiences that others have in the world. As college professors, our tools for sociopolitical consciousness raising are books and other multimodal texts that describe research and tell stories about the world. But our teaching has limits. And the limits of a book club are individual and not socially engaged. It's building a knowing. It's building a knowledge base.

At this reflective moment in our teaching and scholarship, we wonder—so what? Does it matter? Sociopolitical consciousness raising is critical work for teacher educators in preparing culturally responsive educators. But is the sociopolitical consciousness raising that we see in classes effective enough to go beyond mirrors, windows, and doors (Sims Bishop, 1990)? We see in our own narratives of our lives that sociopolitical consciousness raising is a process. And at this point, when consciousness has been raised—what are the next steps towards justice? Our next commitments are action-oriented. Simultaneously, we re-engage in journeying with students—at every place along the path.

As teachers, we engage with humans whose experiences are always complicated and entangled with social and political histories, current realities, and future hopes. And we are no different. At the conclusion of this paper, there is no clear "so what," just as there was no clear "so what" at the end of the book club. This tension has at least two potential outcomes: futility and hope. Futility leads us to say *so what* and abandon the task of teaching. It doesn't make much of a difference anyhow—Ford or Chevy. Instead, we choose hope. We hope that we, as teachers, become more human. The humanity of students is seen in the narratives that we choose (Sims Bishop, 1990), and the realities of social and political life are manifested as present in the concerns of teachers and schools. As we tell stories about our lives and the lives of children and families in education, we name and theorize (hooks, 1994) experience. Knowing more does not lead to action. But action without theory is simply, "blah, blah blah" (Freire, 1998, p. 30).

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