Developing Critical Consciousness in Students for Cultural Transformation

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DEVELOPING

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN STUDENTS FOR CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

In this paper, we address the need for developing critical consciousness in students in institutions of learning. Grounded in Freire's thoughts on critical pedagogy and drawing from studies and research on critical consciousness, we contend that developing students who transform culture must involve raising their level of critical awareness and increasing social engagement and critical action. This paper examines the literature on critical consciousness development and draws attention to factors that are necessary for developing critical consciousness in students. Special attention is given to creating a curriculum and school culture that result in students who are critically aware and engaged in addressing social issues. A model for critical consciousness development is provided with recommendations for administrators, teachers, and curriculum designers.

Introduction

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly" (King, 1963, p. 1).

*I*nstitutions of learning are confronted with the need to adequately prepare students to engage with an interdependent and interconnected global society (Welton, 2021). Properly preparing students involves teaching students how to think critically, solve problems, look at the root cause of issues, and consider systemic perspectives as opposed to merely accepting things at face value (Wagner, 2008; Noddings, 2013; Doughty, 2006). Doughty (2006) has asserted that of the four types of critical thinking skills students can be taught, helping students develop critical consciousness is perhaps the highest calling of the teacher. Kravatz (2007) encourages greater focus on raising the critical consciousness of students so they ultimately contribute to building a better society.

Educators assert that it is not enough to provide students with labor market skills without also equipping them with skills to critique society and their situations: "Beyond those individual characteristics of academic achievement and cultural competence, students must develop a broader socio-political consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). Christian education institutions are uniquely positioned and equipped to empower students to transform society and address injustice and inequality. The theme of justice is interwoven throughout scripture and is the foundation of Christian education institutions. Israel's laws and commands, the wisdom literature, and the prophets all promote and advocate for justice. Jesus continued this emphasis in his teachings,

the Early Church repeated it, and Paul's teachings continue to reiterate it (Westfall & Dyer, 2016). Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 32:4, Psalm 89:14, Micah 6:8, Amos 5:24, and Luke 11:42 all point to the fact that a critical aspect of Christianity is social awareness and social justice. With such rich teaching and authority as its foundation, Christian schools should be at the forefront of developing students who are socially aware and prepared to combat social issues. Yet even where moral and character development are promoted, little time has been devoted to the development of critical consciousness in students (Adams, Monahan, & Willis, 2015). Luna de la Rosa and Jun (2019) assert that critical consciousness is necessary to move Christian higher education institutions from simply providing diversity awareness to ensuring intercultural competency. This involves an openness to difficult conversations about social issues and a campus-wide practice of inclusiveness (Luna de la Rosa & Jun, 2019).

This paper examines the literature on critical consciousness development and draws attention to factors that are necessary for developing critical consciousness in students. Special attention is given to creating a curriculum and school culture that result in students who are critically aware and engaged in addressing social issues. A model for critical consciousness development is provided with recommendations for administrators, teachers, and curriculum designers.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of critical consciousness has its origins in Freire's observation of the Brazilian educational system. Critical consciousness is the "deepening of the attitude of awareness" about social conditions and issues (Freire, 2012, p. 109). It is the process by which individuals reflect on and act to change their social conditions (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Freire describes critical consciousness as insightful interpretation of social problems that results in action. It contributes to the understanding of human dignity and social responsibility. Freire (2012) notes that as students develop critical consciousness, education becomes less abstract and students become more critically aware of their world.

Fostering critical consciousness is not a simple process. Freire (2005) describes the development of critical consciousness as a progression from semi-transitive to naïve transitive, and finally to critical consciousness. In semi-transitive consciousness, the individual cannot apprehend problems that do not relate specifically to their biological needs as the main concern is survival. There is disengagement from or lack of understanding of societal issues. Naïve transitive consciousness is characterized by oversimplification of problems and underestimation of humankind. As Freire (2005) explains it, "Naïve transitivity is the consciousness of men who are still almost part of a mass in whom the developing capacity for dialogue is still fragile and capable of distortion" (p. 14). If this stage does not develop into critical consciousness, it can lead to extremism (Freire, 2005).

"Critical Transitive Consciousness" or "critical consciousness" is demonstrated by insightful interpretation of problems. The critically conscious individual is not guided by emotions but uses reason and sound judgement when analyzing problems: "The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by the substitute of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's findings and by the openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them" (Freire, 2005, p. 14).

Critical Consciousness Development in Students

Studies reveal that developing critical consciousness in students has a positive impact on their lives. Watts, Abdul-Adil, and Pratt (2002) found that young men who cultivated critical consciousness were empowered to critically analyze popular culture messages on gender, culture, race, and social class. Rondini (2015) observed that college students expressed commitment to social justice principles after engaging in service-learning projects aimed at developing critical consciousness. Wong (2014) notes that through critical pedagogy and the development of critical consciousness, students can be convinced to think differently and to challenge assumptions and practices. Wong adds, "The results of this research give me reason to believe that I might

have disrupted my students' prior knowledge and influenced their learning" (p. 59). Through the Social Justice Education Project, young people of color were motivated to change their behavior, their school, and society as a result of developing critical consciousness (Cammarota, 2016).

There is growing interest in the development of critical consciousness of both teachers and students (Haynes, 2013; McDonough, 2009; Weis, 2012; Riley 2014). Critical consciousness contributes to educators positively impacting the lives of all students and to developing students into change agents in society (Hawkins, 2014; Tunstall, 2011; Burrell, 2013; Silva & Langhout, 2011). This concern for the development of critical consciousness in students is reflected in international studies. Abednia and Izadinia (2013) studied the impact of critical literacy on the development of critical consciousness in students in Tehran. Through critical analysis of passages, journal writing reflection, and group discussions, students engaged in contextualizing issues, identifying problem areas, offering solutions, and reconsidering their own previous concepts of issues. Stewart and Gachago (2016) investigated the use of collaborative digital storytelling to develop the critical consciousness of students in South Africa and the United States. The study revealed that students desire to connect with others locally and globally and that the sharing of stories raises awareness of how hegemonic discourse impacts students. Stillar (2013) examined the impact creative writing in English as a foreign language class had on the development of critical consciousness of students in Japan. Data show moderate success in participants viewing critical issues from different perspectives.

Obstacles to Critical Consciousness Development

There are obstacles to critical consciousness development. Freire (2012) notes that pedagogical practices and teacher perception can serve as obstacles to the development of critical consciousness. Teachers who view themselves as narrators or depositors and view students as the listeners and depositories will hinder the development of critical consciousness. Freire states, "This is the 'banking' concept of education,

in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (p. 72). This kind of classroom is teacher-centered instead of student-centered, and the teacher views himself or herself as the one who has knowledge and the student as one who knows nothing, which stifles creativity and critical thinking skills.

Gay and Kirkland (2003) found that progress in the development of critical consciousness can be hindered by both general and specific obstacles. In a study conducted among teacher education students, Gay and Kirkland observed general obstacles as a lack of understanding of what constitutes self-reflection, a lack of quality-guided practice opportunities, and the belief that teaching techniques are easily transferable to all contexts and all populations. Gay & Kirkland (2003) identified the following obstacles:

- diversion or deflecting attention from the issue,
- silence by avoiding participation in discussions, pleading ignorance, or having a lack of exposure,
- guilt without examination of the cause of the guilt or how to move past it,
- benevolent liberalism, the expression of remorse and commitment to eradicating injustice without actually changing personal and professional behavior.

Factors That Influence Critical Consciousness

Researchers have found spirituality, parents, peers, and teachers— as well as the school's curriculum—impact critical consciousness development (Garrido, 2009; Diemer & Li, 2011; Silva & Langhout, 2011). A qualitative study on the influence of spirituality on the development of critical consciousness found six patterns:

1. Suffering resulted in spiritual growth and critical consciousness development.

2. Spirituality raised the awareness that social injustice and equality should be confronted as a community.

3. Spirituality and critical consciousness development led to a critical analysis of oppression.

4. Liberation and transformation took place through spiritual development and led to enhanced critical consciousness development.

5. Spiritual journey led to discovery of the heart of critical consciousness—praxis: action/reflection.

6. Spirituality led to a deeper understanding of the promotion of social justice and equity as a Christian obligation (Garrido, 2009).

The combination of social and political support from parents and peers was found to impact youths' participation in social action and their perception of their capability to effect social and political change (Diemer & Li, 2011).

Through a critically conscious curriculum, even younger students can develop critical consciousness. In an ethnographic study of first graders using an ethnographic, art-focused, and critical multicultural curriculum, Silva and Langhout (2011) discovered that the first grade teacher in the study was able to engage students in discussions about social issues, offer students new ways of viewing their world, and provide them with opportunities to help reduce social problems. The teacher introduced students to an artist each week, and among the artists were poets, musicians, painters, and choreographers. Through the reading of stories, watching of documentaries, and viewing of art, students learned about artists and how their race, ethnicity, gender, special needs, and socio-economic status influenced their work. Students discussed negative stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice, reflected upon their emotions, and engaged in social action.

Raising the critical consciousness of students requires educators to understand their role in the process. Developing critical consciousness necessitates at the very beginning that the teacher-student contradiction be resolved: "The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but

one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who … being taught also teach" (Freire, 2012, p. 80). The teacher and students are simultaneously teaching and learning.

The disposition of the teacher is essential to the development of critical consciousness (Lee & Givens, 2012). Critical pedagogy cannot take place without love that infuses dialogue. Freire (2012) notes that love for others must be at the heart of dialogue and is, in fact, dialogue. The teacher must be compassionate, competent, and committed (Lee & Givens, 2012). Compassion enables teachers to assist students in identifying barriers to their full potential and humanization and to become advocates for students. Competent teachers know their students and which teaching approaches, learning methods, and instructional techniques to use for maximum effectiveness. Competence requires the teacher and student to be engaged in the learning, and "[t]his kind of competence relies on the cooperation of teacher and student to engage in dialogue, which is at the heart of all democratic relationships, and as students engage in a cycle of theory, application, evaluation, and reflection, they become competent themselves in their own movement toward social transformation" (Lee & Givens, 2012, p. 206). Commitment denotes that the teacher views education as pivotal to changing an unjust society and as a vehicle for intervening in the world to effect change.

Teacher candidates can benefit from critical consciousness raising strategies. In order "for teacher education programs to truly meet the needs of Indigenous learners, or indeed of any learner, more value needs to be placed upon encouraging critical discussions across disciplines about how teachers' behaviors, values, and teaching methods may influence learner achievement" (Riley, 2014, p. 150).

Developing critical awareness among teacher candidates involves promoting cultural competence, experiential learning, caring as teaching practice, high expectations, respect for students' cultural identity, and thoughtfully considering and practicing newly acquired knowledge. Moreover, teacher candidates should be educated on practices promoting equitable classroom environments and the influence that their biases may have on decisions and expectations they have for students (Riley, 2014).

Teachers can be instrumental in bringing attention to inequalities and promoting social justice (Palmer, Rangel, Gonzales, & Morales, 2014). They are strategically positioned to create equitable classrooms and schools since they work closely with key constituents (Palmer et al., 2014). The role of the teacher is to intervene in the world and to be thorough and ethical in the presentation of knowledge so as to avoid indifference to a perverse system (Freire, 1998).

Critically Conscious Curriculum

The literature is clear that developing the critical consciousness of students must be a deliberate act. Social awareness and responsibility must be interwoven throughout the curriculum and must be a part of the culture of the school (Srinivason & Cruz, 2015). Berman (2008) contends that developing students who are connected to their communities and involved in improving their communities requires schools to embrace civic engagement as the main goal of education.

Luna de la Rosa and Jun (2019) contend that in Christian higher education institutions, developing critical consciousness begins with a cultural audit, for example, a campus climate study. Data from such a study can be used to implement changes where needed. Furthermore, what is necessary is purposeful embedding of diversity throughout the curricula to include faculty and students from marginalized groups as well as to include diverse leadership; consequently, "compositional diversity within the students and faculty is not enough; presidents, governing boards, cabinet members, provosts, and deans must be diverse for Christian higher education to represent the kingdom of God" (Luna de la Rosa & Jun, 2019, p. 365). This recommendation follows the example provided in Acts chapter 6 where the Grecian Jews in the Early Church expressed dissatisfaction with the level of care given to their widows. The leaders of the church responded by selecting seven leaders, who—by their names—appear to all be Greek, to ensure that the needs of the Grecian widows were met. Acts 6:7–9 (NIV) tells us, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." Awareness, sincere concern for all groups, and diversity in leadership results in exponential growth.

Goerdt (2011) emphasizes global connections in the curriculum. In a case study on the relationship between internationalized pedagogy and critical consciousness development in undergraduate social work students from the United States and Germany, Goerdt found that the dialogic exchange between the students from different nations resulted in movement towards the development of critical consciousness. Participants expressed increased awareness of themselves in relation to individuals from another part of the world, increased motivation to learn more about social welfare policy issues, and increased socio-political critical analysis. Instructional factors such as topical preparation, opportunities for reflection, deliberation and generative inquiry, a comfortable teaching environment that encourages participation, conversational language, a collaborative learning format, and the use of questioning were found to be instrumental in the critical consciousness development of students.

Johnstone (2014) has promoted critical travel pedagogy as a means of raising awareness about social justice issues. He describes critical travel pedagogy as experiential learning and dialogue that aims to raise global awareness and consciousness about oppression. Johnstone has asserted that critical travel pedagogy results in the development of empathy or "compassionate suffering" (p. 34). Participants in Johnstone's study on critical travel pedagogy reported having raised critical consciousness as expressed in their commitment to promoting awareness of oppression and global injustices despite personal discomfort.

Jones (2019) warns that short term mission trips, study abroad, and internships must not be mistaken for cultural awareness and global competence. Without critical awareness and reflection, such learning experiences can give a false sense of critical consciousness and global justice. Jones states, "A mature critical consciousness related to global learning features young people who are critically aware of their role in the colonizer-indigene hyphen, especially in missions, who can name and reflect upon this encounter with sobriety" (p. 59).

Wade (2007) contends that curricula aimed at developing critical consciousness in students—and, in particular, teaching social justice—must contain care and fairness as core themes. Students

should be taught about social justice and should be empowered with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to help create socially just communities. Social justice education must be "student-centered, collaborative, experiential, intellectual, critical, multicultural, and activist" (Wade, 2007, p. 8). Wade recommends that the elementary social studies curriculum be divided into three categories: human rights, democracy, and conservation. Students should be equipped with two categories of skills: skills for reading the world and skills for activism. Additionally, teaching for social justice entails using a variety of teaching strategies. Wade promotes the use of thematic teaching, children's literature, questions, role-play and simulations, primary sources, and visual and performing arts. Social justice education "cannot stop at the classroom door" (p. 78) since "social justice education is as much about learning from the community as it is engaging in social action for the community." (Wade, 2007, p. 79).

Berman (2008) has suggested that the curriculum must be designed to empower students—particularly students from low socio-economic, marginalized, and oppressed groups—so that they come to believe in their ability to make effectual contributions to the lives of others and to their communities. Berman (1997) notes that impacting the socio-political participation of students **through** the overt and covert curriculum calls for numerous environments:

- an open classroom climate,
- acceptance of controversy and conflict,
- student participation in classroom and school decision-making,
- classroom communities that emphasize care and cooperation,
- direct engagement in the social and political arena,
- a holistic view of the classroom structure,
- a holistic view of the classroom that addresses what is taught (content) and how it is taught (pedagogy).

Researchers have argued that for the curriculum to truly be effective in developing the critical consciousness of students, there must be emphasis on critical action (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2014). Watts and Hipolito-Delgado have asserted that few theorists and practitioners who have focused on the development of critical consciousness have emphasized critical action—or sociopolitical action—as they refer to it. Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2014) recommend that programs aimed at developing critical consciousness must have as the main objective socio-political action because this component of critical consciousness is the only component that has the potential to change social and structural aspects of society. In cases where there might be age-based constraints of students, developmental psychologists argue that more emphasis needs to be placed on critical motivation through critical reflection (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

Tharp (2012) contended that while students want increased awareness about diversity, they need to be guided in the process. Tharp recommended the use of dialogical and experiential learning methods. Dialogue and challenging conversations that allow sharing of diverse experiences produce consciousness-raising and help participants to "develop empathy while seeing themselves as interconnected to one another" (Tharp, 2012, p. 31). Experiential learning includes privilege walks, simulations of inequality, and icebreakers.

Critical consciousness development of students must involve increased awareness of the structural and systemic domains of issues (Jones, 2019). Expressing empathy for social issues does not equate to critical consciousness. Students must be challenged to understand the complexity of social issues so that they can effect real social change. Jones expresses that a simplistic view or partial understanding of social issues demonstrates the need for further critical consciousness development.

Weber (2010) has promoted critical literacy as a means of developing critical consciousness in students. Fictional stories can be used to explore theories about modern society. Through individual reading responses and group discussions, students were encouraged to engage in dialogue, reflection, and action. The written responses, which were completed prior to class, were shared in groups of three

or four. Group discussions flowed into whole class discussions. Weber found that students became more engaged in the class, increased in their understanding of abstract texts, and progressed in their critical consciousness development. She notes, "It would be naive to think that critical consciousness immediately develops in my students. Considering my own development, this is something that takes time and effort, but by conducting class in this fashion, students catch a glimpse of this possibility" (Weber, 2010, p. 359). Dialogue served as a vital component in connecting literary fiction to real life.

Educators and researchers have promoted service-learning as an effective way of raising social awareness and connecting students to their communities (Berman, Bailey, Collins, Kinsley & Holman, 2000; Winans-Solis, 2014). Winans-Solis investigated how service-learning contributed to the development of critical consciousness in African American males. Six themes emerged from this study, revealing that while participants struggled to maintain their critically engaged visions of self in the midst of their street culture and the hegemony of society, they developed an awareness of oppressive structures, developed caring relationships within the school that shifted negative perceptions of the school, were empowered through service-learning, and formed a deeper view of self and community. Winans-Solis (2014) reports, "Within the nexus of community, service-learning was empowering as participants were immersed in an array of responsibilities and roles, understood how their actions addressed local issues, and had the opportunity to contribute their knowledge and express their motivations for social change. As a result, participants became invested in creating positive change and developed a sense of responsibility for impacting their community" (p. 617).

A reasonable conclusion to draw from the literature and study findings is that a school's pedagogical practices, extracurricular activities, and overall culture must be considered in the critical consciousness development of students. What is needed is a school where "caring for others is a basic norm … and the curriculum integrates social and political issues in didactic and experiential ways" (Berman, 1997, p. 155). Figure 1 illustrates four factors that affect—and thus must be considered when setting an educational goal like this—are teacher

disposition, extracurricular activities, written curriculum, and "hidden curriculum" (i.e., indirect curriculum). All four should be taken into account because they contribute to the success of an environment that leads to the critical consciousness development in students.
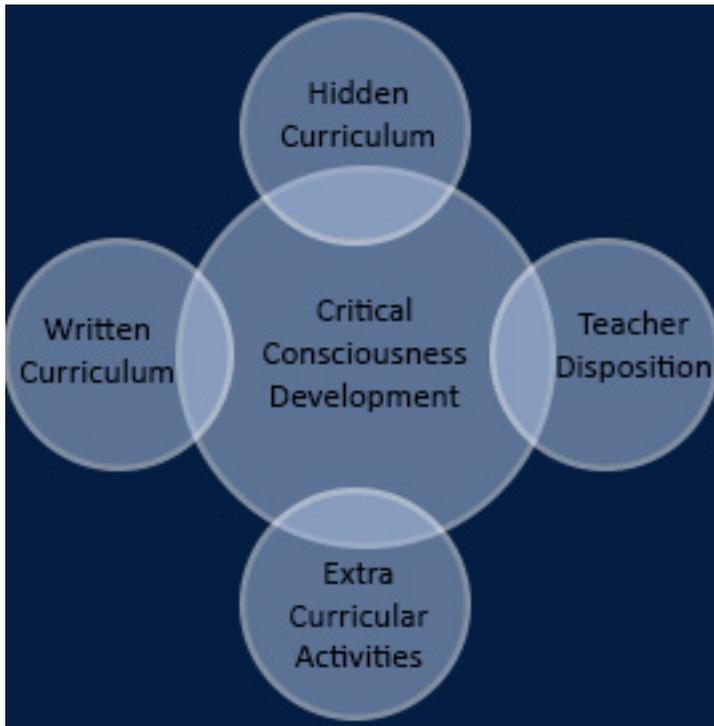

Figure 1: *Model of Critical Consciousness Development*

Table 1 breaks down the four components—teacher disposition, extracurricular activities, written curriculum, and hidden curriculum—into qualities modeled by teachers, administrators, and staff (e.g., compassion and competence) and the hidden curriculum that includes a school's culture and structure of governance. Pedagogical practices in classroom curricula include dialogue and discussion, reflection, and experiential learning while extra-curricular activities involve student participation in campus gatherings (e.g., music and special speakers) and leadership roles in student government.

Curriculum Components			
Hidden Curriculum	**Teacher Disposition**	**Written Curriculum**	**Extra-Curricular Activities**
School Culture Social awareness and responsibility (Srinivason & Cruz, 2015) Integration of Spirituality (Garrido, 2009)	**Compassion** Care about student development and advocate for students (Freire, 2012; Lee & Givens, 2012)	**Themes of Care & Fairness** Human Rights Democracy Conservation (Wade, 2007)	**Community Engagement** (Berman, 1997) Activities that allow students to cooperate and collaborate with others in the community
School Governance Administration and school boards are committed to critical consciousness development. Student involvement in school decision making (Berman, 1997) **The institutional structure** encourages a democratic process (Berman 2017). Parental Involvement (Diemer & Li, 2011)	**Competence** Know students, content, and a variety of instructional strategies (Lee & Givens, 2012)	**Dialogue** Safe space for students to share their beliefs and thoughts on issues; to engage in difficult conversations (Freire, 2012; Berman, 1997; Tharp, 2012; Luna de la Rosa & Jun, 2019)	**Student Government** (Berman, 1997) Student leadership and decision making opportunities
Composition Student population, faculty, and leadership reflect diversity	**Commitment** View educational platform as vehicle to transform society (Lee & Givens, 2012)	**Critical Action** Taking deliberate steps to address social issues and concerns (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2014; Wade, 2007)	**General Institutional Gatherings** Including diversity of speakers, music, and cultural practices in events such as chapels and assemblies (Luna de la Rosa & Jun, 2019)

Curriculum Components			
Hidden Curriculum	**Teacher Disposition**	**Written Curriculum**	**Extra-Curricular Activities**
	Awareness Cultural competence, respect for cultural differences, self-reflection (Riley, 2014)	**Reflection** Opportunities to think about your beliefs and how they impact you and others. (Freire, 2012; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011; Jones, 2019)	
		Critical Literacy Examination and analysis of texts to understand meaning and messages related to social issues (Weber, 2010)	
		Experiential Learning: Critical travel pedagogy (Johnstone, 2014) Simulations, privilege walks, (Tharp, 2012) Service Learning, (Winans-Solis, 2014) Internationalized Pedagogy Global Connections (Goerdt, 2011)	

Table 1: *Curriculum Components*

Recommendations for Practice

The literature on critical consciousness provides several implications for practice:

1. The curriculum should be designed to develop the critical and analytical skills of students. Freire (2012) contends that education aimed at developing critical consciousness must be problem-posing, thereby stimulating critical thinking, reflection, and action to transform injustice and inequities. Attention must be given to the overt and covert curriculum to ensure that biblical principles, caring, justice, and social involvement are embraced and modeled by all constituents.

2. Classroom activities should include dialogue, reflection, and an action component that connects directly to community involvement. Administrators and educators must be purposeful about including opportunities for participation in addressing injustice and inequalities. Critical consciousness development takes place most easily through experiential learning (Jones, 2019).

3. Teachers themselves must be critically conscious and must be equipped with the skills needed to raise students' level of critical consciousness. Pedagogical practices, along with teachers' beliefs and values, should stimulate critical reflection and analysis (Riley, 2014). Teacher training and professional development should allow opportunities to engage in critical discussions and self-reflection (Riley, 2014; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Educators should also be provided with multiple opportunities to develop and refine critical pedagogy, which Freire contended is key to critical consciousness development.

4. Critical consciousness should be reflected through diversity of the student population, faculty, and institutional leadership. Students should be able to see critical consciousness modeled by those who teach and lead them. Otherwise, social justice and equity can be negated by what is done rather than what is said (Luna de la Rosa & Jun, 2019).

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