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Critical Consciousness: A Critique and Critical Analysis of the Literature

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Abstract

The education system has been heralded as a tool of liberation and simultaneously critiqued as a tool of social control to maintain the oppressive status quo. Critical consciousness (CC), developed by the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, advanced an educational pedagogy to liberate the masses from systemic inequity maintained and perpetuated by process, practices and outcomes of interdependent systems and institutions. If people are not aware of inequity and do not act to constantly resist oppressive norms and ways of being, then the result is residual inequity in perpetuity. If inequity is likened to a disease or poison, then CC has been deemed the antidote to inequity and the prescription needed to break the cycle. As such, CC is a construct that has important scholarly, practice and policy implications. Scholars, noting the relevance and application of CC to current social problems, have advanced CC theory and practice. However, these innovative advancements have left fissures in the CC theoretical base in need of resolution and consensus to advance a collective and organized body of CC theory. This paper explores the divergent CC scholarship within CC theory and practice articles, provides an in-depth review of the inconsistencies, and suggests ideas to resolve the discrepancies from the literature to support the need for a new, CC-based construct, transformative potential. Without such a review, moving toward conceptual clarity, the lack of a coherent CC knowledgebase will impede the reflection and action needed to transform systems and institutions that maintain and perpetuate systemic inequity that have dehumanizing consequences. If implemented within urban education, theoretical models, grounded in CC theory, could help achieve a system of education that is just, equitable and liberating.

Keywords

Critical consciousness; oppression; inequity; social justice; health; education

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Transformative potential (TP), a theoretical framework informed by and developed in response to the theoretical limitations of Freire's (2000) critical consciousness pedagogy, is defined as levels of consciousness and action that produce potential for change at one or more socio-ecosystemic (e.g., individual, institutional) levels (Jemal 2016). A person with a high level of transformative potential critically reflects on the conditions that shape his or her life and actively works with self and/ or others to change problematic conditions (Campbell and MacPhail 2002; Jemal 2016). The process of transformation requires the simultaneous and reciprocating processes of objectifying and acting (Freire 2000). One cannot truly perceive the depth of the problem without being involved in some form of

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action confronting the problem (Corcoran et al. 2015; Freire 2000). Thus, merely reflecting on realities without intervention will not lead to transformation. With these ideas in mind, and similar to how many scholars have conceptualized critical consciousness, TP comprises two dimensions: Transformative Consciousness (TC) and Transformative Action (TA). Although TP and CC have more in common than not, one major difference between TP and CC is that the two dimensions of TP each have three levels. For TC, the hierarchical levels of consciousness are denial, blame and critical. For TA, the tiered levels of action are destructive, avoidant, and critical. Thus, for TP, critical consciousness and critical action are the highest levels of each dimension and produce the most transformative potential.

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 2000, p. 34)

Critical consciousness, or its derivative, transformative potential, could be used to inform the structure and content of urban education to address oppressive conditions for those most impacted (Gay and Kirkland 2003). For much of the world's citizenry, education is the key to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (U.S. Declaration of Independence 1776); though, some may argue that the education system is a tool of social control and means of maintaining the current, oppressive sociopolitical order (Matthews 2004). Existing educational disparities suggest that the education system in the United States systematically denies equal access and opportunity to marginalized populations (NASW 2015). The overrepresentation of African American students in special education classes for more than four decades (Blanchett 2006, 2009; Gardner and Miranda 2001); nationwide disparities in high school graduation rates for black, Hispanic, and white students (68, 76, and 85%, respectively) (National Center for Education Statistics 2015); and the suspension and expulsion of black students at a rate three times greater than white students (Gibson et al. 2014; Haight et al. 2014; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2014) depict a dismal reality of racial oppression within the U.S. education system. Research investigating these issues can also be a tool of oppression, further burying the systemic causes of educational disparities. For example, one study found that the racial gap in suspension rates was completely accounted for by a measure of the prior problem behavior of the student (Wright et al. 2014). This study suggested that the use of suspensions may not have been as racially biased as some scholars have argued (Wright et al. 2014), completely ignoring the possibility that the identification of prior problem behavior itself can be racially biased, thus, integrally linking prior problem behavior and school suspension, such that one is a proxy for the other.

Similar disparities to suspension rates are illustrated by the overrepresentation of youth of color in the child welfare system (Boyd 2014). These different but mirroring institutions reflect how U.S. systems–e.g., Education, Criminal Justice, Employment –are interrelated, such that occupying a substandard position in one system will likely guarantee an equivalent position in other systems. Further evidence of integrated systemic failure for racial

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minorities and economically disadvantaged populations is the school-to-prison pipeline (Amurao 2013). Because African Americans are incarcerated at higher rates than whites (U.S. Census Bureau 2015; U.S. Department of Justice 2014), the impact of a criminal record on employment is confounded with race (Alexander 2010; Pager 2003; Smith and Jemal 2015). Income and education factors, which are integrally related and occur along racial and ethnic lines, are significant predictors of health status (Sambamoorthi and McAlpine 2003; Viruell-Fuentes et al. 2012). Oppression and the associated toxic stress have been identified as a fundamental cause of disease (Gee and Ford 2011; Link and Phelan 1995; Williams et al. 1997) and critical consciousness, its antidote (Watts et al. 1999).

The theoretical framework of critical consciousness (CC) has the objective of addressing multi-systemic oppression at its core (Freire 2000). From a critical consciousness perspective, internalized and structural oppression are at the heart of most individual (e.g., substance use) and social (e.g., community violence) dysfunction (Chronister and McWhirter 2006; Mullaly 2002; Windsor et al. 2014a). The cyclical nature between processes (e.g., community policing practices) and outcomes (e.g., racial disparity in mass incarceration) of social injustice create a self-perpetuating phenomenon; like a virus, social injustice infects the host system from individuals to families to institutions. The under-recognized role of systemic inequity in individual and social problems, that is, the lack of CC, creates the necessary environment for oppression to rampantly spread through systems from the individual to the macro levels, causing massive, widespread system failure.

For Freire, oppression amounted to a dehumanization process for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Freire (2000) determined that it was necessary for people to think critically about oppressive realities and challenge inequitable social conditions to reclaim their humanity. “[T]he process whereby people achieve an illuminating awareness both of the socioeconomic and cultural circumstances that shape their lives and their capacity to transform that reality” (Prilleltensky 1989, p. 800) is parallel with an empowerment process; an active, participatory process through which individuals and groups gain greater control over their identities and lives, protect human rights, and reduce social injustice (Maton 2008; Peterson 2014; Rappaport 1987). Critical consciousness is an empowering, strengths-based, nonexpert directed approach that fosters insight and active engagement in solutions to challenge inequity (Baxamusa 2008; Ozer et al. 2013; Peterson 2014; Prati and Zani 2013; Zippay 1995) underlying major social (e.g., racial disparities in criminal justice system) and health (HIV epidemic in communities of color) crises (Capone and Petrillo 2013; Fawcett et al. 2010; Peterson 2014). Moreover, opportunities for self-determination and control over one’s life contribute to health, wellness and quality of life (Prilleltensky et al. 2001). To date, there has been significant and innovative scholarship and reformulation of critical consciousness to prevent or ameliorate inequitable conditions that cause social and health disparities (Diemer et al. 2014).

Critical consciousness theory has been used in health and outcome research to address disparities, such as health interventions to reduce HIV risk (Campbell and MacPhail 2002), domestic violence (Chronister and McWhirter 2006), and substance use (Windsor et al. 2014a). Accordingly, CC has been associated with a host of desirable individual-level outcomes among marginalized people, such as healthier sexual decision-making among

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South African youth of color (Campbell and MacPhail 2002), reduction of substance use among adult African American men and women with recent incarceration history (Windsor et al. 2014a), mental health among urban adolescents (Zimmerman et al. 1999), academic achievement and school engagement among urban African American youth (O'Connor 1997), civic participation among poor and working-class youth of color (Diemer et al. 2010; Diemer and Li 2011), positive career outcomes among female survivors of domestic violence (Chronister and McWhirter 2006), future career planning among urban youth (Diemer and Blustein 2006) and, when measured during adolescence, the attainment of higher-paying and more prestigious occupations in early adulthood (Diemer 2009). Hatcher et al. (2010) noted that outcomes, such as reduction of intimate partner violence, unprotected sex among young women, and improved communication between parents and their children about sex, can be theoretically linked to critical consciousness. Thus, research seems to support a relationship between CC and positive outcomes and the reduction of negative consequences associated with oppression.

Critical consciousness has important scholarly and practice implications. However, Freire did not provide a conceptual model of CC, and thus, many scholars spanning the education, community psychology, social work, public health, and social science fields have adopted, interpreted, applied and expanded CC in various directions (Green 2009; Thomas et al. 2014). The purpose of this paper is to provide an in-depth review and critique of the CC literature that delves beyond highlighting the current state of the CC literature (e.g., Diemer et al. 2015; Diemer et al. 2016; Watts et al. 2011; Watts and Hipolito-Delgado 2015) to identify the conceptual inconsistencies, ambiguities and gaps that dominate and weaken CC theory to support the need to develop the new construct, transformative potential.

Conceptualization of Critical Consciousness

One component

Some researchers conceptualize CC as a unidimensional construct with critical reflection as the single component (Mustakova-Possardt 1998; Watts et al. 1998), a purely cognitive state that derives from the critical analysis of sociopolitical inequity (Diemer and Li 2011; Mustakova-Possardt 1998; Watts and Abdul-Adil 1998). The intellectual analyses of the sociopolitical and cultural environment permit the identification of oppression and inquiry about its existence (Freire 2000; Watts and Abdul-Adil 1998). This critical awareness incorporates perspectives of relationships between self and society and requires a metacognitive experience in that one must think about their thinking, be aware of the existence of consciousness, and mindful of its ever-evolving process (Houser and Overton 2001). For example, persons with the highest level of CC are aware of their own assumptions shaping interpretations of reality and their responsibility for choices that either sustain or alter that reality (Carlson et al. 2006). Chronister et al. (2004) state that CC is overcoming false consciousness and achieving a critical understanding of self, environment/world, and one's place in the world including awareness of how values, beliefs and practices reinforce structures of injustice. Shin et al. (2016) provide a slight variation by defining CC "as awareness of the systemic, institutionalized forms of discrimination associated with racism, classism, and heterosexism" (p. 210). Some scholars include a causal understanding

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rooted in history (Watts et al. 2011). This causal or consequential domain is a temporal dimension that helps "reveal cause-and-effect relationships between ongoing social forces and current social circumstances" (Watts et al. 2011, p. 52) and requires recognizing the "reality as an oppressive reality" (Freire 2000, p. 175). This realization may potentially be unlikely for students receiving a banking style of education, wherein teachers deposit information into students, empty vessels, to be memorized and regurgitated to satisfy standards of assessment (Freire 2000). Awareness or an intellectual component of CC seems to be extremely important as it is incorporated in every scholar's CC definition that was reviewed. However, CC as awareness most likely would not result in Freire's goal of liberation from an oppressive reality. "Resistance is key because analysis without action does not produce tangible change" (Watts et al. 2003, p. 186).

Cognitive-action—Also, seemingly unidimensional, are definitions of CC that connect awareness and action. Martin (2003) notes that the fundamental aspect of CC is "the act of intellection which is to focus on one's self-consciousness upon an examination of societal and individual contradictions by questioning fundamental assumptions and constantly reconstructing ever new interpretations of the world," (p. 414) so that the act of cognition itself becomes a critical consciousness. For example, a person who has developed CC will critically inquire into ideologies, philosophies, perceptions, interpretations, and ideas that stem from the mainstream, socially constructed reality (Mejía and Espinosa 2007). Houser and Overton (2001, p. 612) state that CC is "searching beneath and beyond our existing assumptions." Watt (2007) noted that one with CC will seek opportunities to develop awareness and skills that facilitate effectively addressing issues of social injustice, such as engaging in difficult dialogues that may cause discomfort. Watts and Abdul-Adil (1998) note that CC is the act of critical thinking when applied to the societal realm. Likewise, Freire (2000, p. 128) noted that "critical reflection is also action," indicating a blurred line.

Two components

Some literature seems to suggest that the Freirian notion of CC is characterized by the capacity to critically reflect and act upon one's oppressive environment (Campbell and MacPhail 2002; Diemer and Blustein 2006). These definitions of CC go beyond a cognitive state to include capacity, ability, skill, or realization of one's power to conduct a critical analysis of structural oppression and potential actions to challenge inequities within sociopolitical environments (Diemer and Blustein 2006; Diemer et al. 2006; Getzlaf and Osborne 2010). For example,Garcia et al. (2009) define CC as "the ability to recognize and challenge oppressive and dehumanizing political, economic, and social systems" (p. 20). These definitions of CC only require the understanding of oppression and inequities (Getzlaf and Osborne 2010) or perception of disparities (Watts and Abdul-Adil 1998), and the realization of one's power to take individual and collective actions to create conditions of equity and social justice (Getzlaf and Osborne 2010), but seem to stop short of conducting the social analysis or taking action. Thus, one issue with the awareness and capacity definitions is that having the awareness and/or capacity does not mean that a person will use that capacity or will act on that awareness, thereby limiting the potential for transformation.

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The second category of two-dimensional CC definitions moves beyond capacity, providing the theoretical foundation of transformative potential. Diemer et al. (2014, p. 2) note, "Critical consciousness (CC) represents oppressed or marginalized people's critical analysis of their social conditions and individual or collective action taken to change perceived inequities." Accordingly, several scholars articulate that CC has two key dimensions: (1) sociopolitical analysis, also called critical reflection, critical analysis or social analysis, and (2) critical action, also called civic engagement and social action (Campbell and MacPhail 2002; Diemer and Blustein 2006; Diemer and Li 2011; Windsor et al. 2014a). Although some scholars may agree on a two-dimensional operationalization of CC; this agreement does not always lead to the use of the same two dimensions. For example, Diemer and Blustein (2006) conceptualized CC as including critical reflection and sociopolitical control. They did not include action. To gain a better understanding of CC, the key dimensions must be examined.

Reflection—Most scholars seem to agree that critical reflection refers to examining everyday realities to analyze the relationships between personal contexts and the wider social forces of structural oppression (e.g., social, economic and political environments) that restrict access to opportunity and resources, and thus, sustain inequity and perpetuate injustice that limit well-being and human agency (Diemer et al. 2016; Diemer and Li 2011; Giroux 1983; Hatcher et al. 2010; Watts et al. 2011; Watts and Flanagan 2007). The reflection dimension includes: (1) thinking critically about accepted beliefs, thoughts, feelings and assumptions; (2) detecting the hidden interests underlying personal and social assumptions and beliefs (whether class-, gender-, race/ethnicity- or sect-based); and (3) identifying how history impacts the present details of everyday life and how ways of thinking and feeling serve to maintain and perpetuate existing systems of inequality (Diemer and Blustein 2006; Diemer et al. 2006; Watts et al. 2003). As a slight deviation, some scholars have stated that critical reflection has two subdomains: "(a) critical analysis of perceived social inequalities, such as racial/ethnic, gendered, and socioeconomic constraints on educational and occupational opportunity; and (b) egalitarianism, the endorsement of societal equality" (Diemer et al. 2014, p. 2). For Transformative consciousness, the level of critical consciousness is most similar to critical reflection on a cognitive-emotional process of creating meaning through interpretations of shared or similar social experiences that is shaped by cultural norms, informing typical patterns of thought and behavior (Carlson et al. 2006; Jemal 2016).

Action—Action has been conceptualized as "an individual's objective ability or potency to act given structural constraints" (Campbell and MacPhail 2002, p. 333). Freire (1973, p. 66) also noted that "while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others," emphasizing the need for individual and collective action to transform the reality of the socioeconomic and cultural circumstances that create and perpetuate social injustice. Many scholars define critical action as the overt engagement in individual or collective action taken to produce sociopolitical change of the unjust aspects (e.g., institutional policies and practices) of society that cause unhealthy conditions (Diemer and Li 2011; Diemer et al. 2014; Watts et al. 2011; Watts and Flanagan 2007; Zimmerman et al. 1999). Individual critical action may include "acts of individual women sharing advice,

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support, and info with others" (Hatcher et al. 2010, p. 543). Critical action encompasses social justice activism and can take many forms including practices outside traditional political processes and forums or more formal actions such as voting and community organizing (Hatcher et al. 2010; Watts et al. 2011; Windsor et al. 2014b).

Some scholars have noted that critical action encompasses sociopolitical control, which itself has definitional variations. Sociopolitical control has been used synonymously with critical action since it represents participation in individual and/or collective social action to effect social change (Diemer and Li 2011; Ginwright and James 2002; Zimmerman et al. 1999). Others have noted that sociopolitical control is expected to be closely associated with critical consciousness since it represents one's perceived capacity to change social and political conditions rather than direct engagement in action (Diemer and Blustein 2006). CC scholars have surmised that critical action has two subcomponents that include: (1) sociopolitical control, perceived self-efficacy to effect social and political change, and (2) social action that includes, for example, engagement in protests (Diemer and Li 2011; Watts and Flanagan 2007). It should be noted that originally sociopolitical control "refers to beliefs that actions in the social and political system can lead to desired outcomes" (Zimmerman and Zahniser 1991, p. 736) which may be more closely related to political efficacy or participatory competence (Kieffer 1984) than to action.

Definitions that include action may better serve Freire's purpose of liberation; however, the action definitions are limited by the numerous variations causing conceptual ambiguities. Similar to the critical reflection domain, there is inconsistency in how to operationalize the action domain. For the most part, there seems to be uncertainty regarding whether critical action involves capacity to act (Diemer and Blustein 2006; Diemer et al. 2006) or overt action (Chronister and McWhirter 2006). To add complexity to this issue, the collective behavior literature has experienced conflict regarding what constitutes activism (Corning and Myers 2002). Debates have focused on whether action must be extra-institutional to be labeled activist, the amount of coordination needed between the actors engaged in the action, and whether one's membership in a movement is founded on explicit actions and/or supportive attitudes (Corning and Myers 2002). Does action go beyond type of action to what the action is supporting? This is important to question because action type (e.g., voting, participating in a political party, club or organization) without consideration of the cause would allow oppressive, white supremacist, totalitarian individuals and groups to be critically conscious, which is counterintuitive.

Reflection-action relationship—Another idea to note is that there is a dynamic relationship between reflection and action that is viewed as reciprocal, cyclical or transitive, such that greater reflection leads to greater action and vice versa (Diemer et al. 2014; Campbell and MacPhail 2002; Freire 1973; Watts et al. 2011). Critical reflection is generally considered a precursor to critical action—people do not blindly act to change oppressive social conditions without some consciousness that their social conditions are unjust (Watts et al. 2011). Freire (2000, p. 66) also noted that "reflection – true reflection – leads to action." Freire (2000) theorized that as oppressed people begin to analyze their social conditions, they would feel able and compelled to act to change them.

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> It so happens that to every understanding, sooner or later an action corresponds. Once man perceives a challenge, understands it, and recognizes the possibilities of response, he acts. The nature of that action corresponds to the nature of his understanding. (Freire, 1973, p.83).

Some theory testing seems to support an association between reflection and action. Diemer et al. (2014) results from testing a critical consciousness scale (CCS) noted that The Critical Reflection: Perceived Inequality factor correlated significantly with the Critical Action: Sociopolitical Participation factor (Study 1 r = .29; Study 2 r = .18). Diemer et al. (2014, p. 16) concluded "This association is supportive of the central theoretical tenet of CC, that perceptions of inequality motivate marginalized people to act to redress injustice (Freire 1993)." However, there is no way to discern from the correlation on cross-sectional data whether perceptions of inequality motivated people to act or whether the action improved perceptions of inequality. Longitudinal data is needed to better discern the direction of the reflection-action relationship.

Three components

Few researchers have theorized three distinct components for CC: cognitive (e.g., critical reflection or critical social analysis), attitudinal [i.e., political efficacy – the perceived capacity to effect sociopolitical change (Morrell 2003)], and behavioral (e.g., civic or political action) (Watts et al. 2011). Similarly,Hatcher et al. (2010) portray CC as having three distinct elements: analytical, constructive and mobilizing. The analytical and mobilizing aspects are similar to the critical reflection and action components, respectively. The constructive process is similar to political efficacy in that it encourages the belief that "change is possible – participants reinterpret their situation and develop strategies for improving it" (Hatcher et al. 2010, p. 543) and can envision solutions involving individual and collective action. Related to political efficacy, "scholarship (Watts and Flanagan 2007) and empirical evidence (Berg et al. 2009; Diemer and Li 2011; Zimmerman and Zahniser 1991) suggest that critical motivation, or the expressed commitment to address societal inequalities and produce social change, may also be a component of CC" (Diemer et al. 2014, p. 19). Similarly, Mustakova-Possardt (1998) defines moral motivation "as the overall predominance of moral over expediency concerns" (1998, p. 13). Whether efficacy or motivation, these concepts seem to bridge the reflection and action components of CC.

Scholars have identified different dimensions of CC and use various combinations of one, two, or three dimensions to construct CC. For example, McWhirter and McWhirter (2016) started with a three-dimension construction of CC and, after conducting factor analyses, ended with a two-dimensional factor structure of CC composed of critical agency and critical behavior dimensions. This is different than the three-factor CC operationalization – awareness, efficacy, and action – proposed by Watts et al. (2011). In addition to the various combinations of components used to operationalize CC, there is inconsistency within the literature for how to operationalize single dimensions. For example,Diemer et al. (2014) operationalized critical reflection as having two sub-dimensions, composed of endorsement of group equality and perceived inequality; whereas for other scholars, critical reflection is unidimensional. However, when Diemer et al. (2014) tested the operationalization of CC, he found that the two theorized sub-factors of critical reflection did not correlate with each

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other, suggesting the factors are distinct constructs rather than sub-factors of critical reflection. In addition to considering whether critical reflection has one or more sub-factors, Diemer's results bring into question whether critical reflection includes endorsement of equity rather than equality. Further theory testing is needed and will elucidate how the dimensions of CC associate with each other.

To further complicate the response to what is critical consciousness; there are definitions that formulate CC as a process rather than an outcome. Some scholars propose that CC is a continuous process of development without an endpoint, "referring to "the development of intellectual understandings of the way in which social conditions have fostered peoples' situations of disadvantage" (Campbell and MacPhail 2002, p. 333) and learning how to "critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them" (Watts et al. 2011, p. 44). Thus, CC has been conceptualized as a process of growth in "knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties and capacity for action in political and social systems" (Watts et al. 2003, p 185). Moreover, Getzlaf and Osborne (2010, p. 2) state that "CC is a concept derived from Freire's (2000) process of conscientization, a process in which learners become conscious of the ways in which they think about themselves and their worlds, and transform these ways of thinking to a new perspective." Thus, is CC an outcome of the process of conscientization or are CC and conscientization simply synonymous?

Conscientização and Praxis

The "term conscientização refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire 2000, p. 35). Many scholars have supplemented the definition of conscientização for the definition of critical consciousness and/or scholars use the terms critical consciousness, conscientização, conscientization, and consciousness-raising interchangeably (e.g., Diemer et al. 2016; Shin et al. 2016; Windsor et al. 2014a). A probable and more accurate interpretation is that although, consciousness-raising, conscientization and conscientização are the same concepts, critical consciousness is not synonymous with conscientização. It appears that conscientização and CC are distinct and that CC is the "product of the interaction between motivation and evolving structures of thought, where each component continuously shapes the other" (Mustakova-Possardt 1998, p. 27). Similarly, Gutierrez and Ortega (1991, p. 26) noted that "critical consciousness can arise through a process of consciousness-raising."

True liberation requires individuals to repossess their humanity by reaching a level of critical consciousness (Freire 2000). However, adapting to the cyclical, self-perpetuating, viral processes of oppression is dehumanizing and creates a society of mutated beings, infected from our minds to our epigenome, divided from our true selves, isolated from others, and disconnected from the creative, healing, and survival power of human relationship. As such, a key aspect of critical consciousness development is that people move from being objects that are acted upon by oppressive conditions to empowered subjects that act upon their sociopolitical environment for justice (Diemer et al. 2006; Freire 2000). Freire used a process to move individuals through a series of lower, non-critical levels or stages of consciousness to higher levels of consciousness (Campbell and MacPhail 2002; Carlson et al. 2006; Freire 1973). A few scholars have identified the stages in the CC development

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process. Freire (2000, 1973) developed a problem-posing education, replacing the banking model, to develop CC that included: (1) identifying the social problem; (2) analyzing the underlying causes; and (3) implementing solutions. Gutierrez and Ortega (1991) identified a five-phase group process of CC development: (1) recognition of intragroup similarities supporting group identity; (2) development of shared goals; (3) naming of barriers that limit self and group expression; (4) exploration of ideas to address identified barriers; and (5) plan for action. When analyzing the data from a photovoice study,Carlson et al. (2006) identified a four-stage process for the development of critical reflection; which, some scholars use critical refection as interchangeable with CC. The four stages are: (1) passive adaptation, (2) emotional engagement, (3) cognitive awakening, and (4) intentions to act (Carlson et al. 2006). Similarly, transformative potential requires a process to transition from lower levels of consciousness (i.e., denial and blame) and action (i.e., destructive and avoidant) to the highest levels of critical consciousness and critical action.

Another potential area for confusion is between CC development (i.e., conscientization or conscientização) and the liberation process. Liberation is the goal of CC and CC is the goal of conscientization. Freire noted that the liberation process cannot be purely intellectual (i.e., verbalism) but must involve action, nor can the liberation process be limited to activism without serious reflection: “only then will it be a praxis” (Freire 2000, p. 65). To transform oppressive realities for liberation, individuals must simultaneously execute CC’s two main components by reflecting on themselves and the world and acting upon that reality (Freire 2000). Praxis is “a fluid process, without a finite end point” (Hatcher et al. 2010, p. 551). In other words, CC is reflection and action, but praxis is reflecting and acting, and conscientization is “a continually evolving process” (Garcia et al. 2009, p. 20) that “brings with it the possibility of a new praxis, which at the same time makes possible new forms of consciousness” (Hernandez et al. 2005, p. 110). For example,Hatcher et al. (2010) noticed feedback loops rather than a linear process during their conscientização intervention in which collective action seemed to “draw participants back to sharing common problems with one another and translating the ‘information’ they learned into meaningful conversations with family and friends” (p. 552). This is consistent with Freirian pedagogy, in that social action should naturally loop back to analysis and dialogue such that reflection and social action merge to form praxis, the foundation for revolution.

Tools, strategies, and methods

Perhaps another issue confusing critical consciousness, conscientization, and praxis is that some scholars include the tools, strategies and methods for conscientization (i.e., consciousness-raising) within the definition of CC. Watts et al. (2011 p. 45) state, “For [Freire], reading, dialogue, reflection, and action were all part of what he called critical consciousness and were key to a new self-understanding in historical, cultural, and political contexts.” However, dialogue and reading are tools of the consciousness-raising process, and thus, not part of the CC construct (Freire 2000). There are several tools used for conscientização, all of which are the same for developing Transformative Potential. Gutierrez and Ortega (1991 p. 26) note two methods for raising consciousness include:

> constructive dialogue occurring in small groups, and praxis, a process of action and reflection. Both techniques are aimed at helping individuals to understand the

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nature of their experience, the status of their group in society, and their ability to engage in social change.

Garcia and colleagues (2009) provide a list of practices and tools that can be used to promote CC including setting aside time for initial and ongoing critical conversations; reflective questions, critical genograms, maps of social capital, and questionnaires for exploring social identities and systems of privilege and oppression. These tools that can be imbedded in urban education curricula are needed to break the silence surrounding injustice to lead to transformative action (Freire 2000). To further clarify the definition of CC, it is important to distinguish between CC and the tools used to develop CC.

Dialogue and critical reflection—Dialogue or open discussions regarding inequity seems to be one of the most important methods of conscientization. If one of the conditions of consciousness-raising is the investigation of ways of thinking, then dialogue is the method through which that investigation occurs. Freire (2000, pp. 96–97) states, “The methodology of that investigation must likewise be dialogical, affording the opportunity both to discover generative themes and to stimulate people’s awareness in regard to these themes.” The development of CC ultimately requires interactively analyzing, questioning and discussing the status quo and beliefs about sociocultural contexts, power dynamics surrounding race, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of social identity - that dictate who is and is not allowed access to resources and opportunities and how that access is granted or denied - so the mundane and normal cultural practices that have been deeply ingrained and made invisible to perpetuate systemic inequity and influence behavior can be seen in a new light (Garcia et al. 2009; Hatcher et al. 2010). An awareness of systemic inequity as structural violence can be a first step toward social change (Watts and Serrano-Garcia 2003) for part of structural violence is denial of one’s primordial right to speak which must be reclaimed (Freire 2000; Quintana and Segura-Herrera 2003). Language has been used to create false divisions and fear, scarring people’s identities with destructive labels. Dialogue is of critical importance to conscientization because the symbolization that language makes possible allows dehumanized persons to reinterpret their experiences of themselves, others and their worlds (Saari 2002). Dialogue creates new possibilities and opportunities for relationships and interconnections between external internal worlds (Saari 2002). These new insights from revised interpretations can be integrated into one’s repertoire of self and world knowledge (Saari 2002), thereby transforming consciousness. Lastly, critical thinking skills are needed to aid reflection, develop awareness, and deconstruct (Garcia et al. 2009; Thomas et al. 2014) “social forces that influence them and their communities—especially as they relate to race, culture, class, and gender” (Watts et al. 2002, p. 41).

Reflective questioning—One tool to promote critical reflection through dialogue is the posing of reflective questions. Reflective questions direct attention to power dynamics involved in various systems that maintain systemic inequity (Garcia et al. 2009). Examples of such questions may include: “Where does knowledge of dysfunctional families come from and how do class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability inform the dynamics of this system” (Garcia et al. 2009, p. 32). Reflective questions allow exploration of how “knowledge is created and maintained by larger sociopolitical forces” (Garcia et al. 2009, p. 32). Watts et al.’s (2002) curriculum (Young Warriors) for African American male

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adolescents employs a series of five reflective questions designed to develop critical thinking skills about sociopolitical issues. Questions provoke discussions about the status quo, promote the ability to analyze or identify the meaning of experiences and events, and then elicit how participants would improve the situation or act to promote social justice (Watts et al. 2002).

Psychosocial support—The development of critical consciousness is theorized to occur when people are socially supported to explore and challenge social inequity (Diemer et al. 2006; Diemer and Li 2011; Freire 1973; Ginwright and James 2002; Giroux 1983; Green 2009). Supportive contexts may encourage the development of perceived capacity that one can make a difference and seems to foster engagement in sociopolitical action (Diemer et al. 2009). For example, observing a family member actively resist racism may encourage one to develop CC (O'Connor 1997). For youth's development of CC, the school setting and peer level of support seems to be an important contributing factor (Diemer et al. 2006; Houser and Overton 2001; Lynn et al. 1999). Moreover, researchers have noted that the skills needed to develop CC, such as critical thinking skills, can be taught and modeled (Diemer et al. 2006; Watts et al. 2002). Thus, being around others, especially those in roles of authority, with higher levels of critical consciousness may be a source of support for CC development.

Co-learning—Freire (2000), through problem-posing education, revolutionized the teacher-student relationship by emphasizing co-learner, non-hierarchical, respectful relationships between students and teachers engaged in a process of co-constructing knowledge through multi-methods and dialogical means (Smith-Maddox and Solórzano 2002). The teachers are viewed as facilitators who model challenging ideas, values and assumptions perpetuated by the dominant social order (Smith-Maddox and Solórzano 2002). The facilitator's role is to empower students through an egalitarian relationship with learners and offer advice and support in a non-directive way (Campbell and MacPhail 2002). Approaches that view the learner as a "passive 'empty vessel' to be filled with knowledge emanating from an active expert teacher, are contrary to the development of the critical debate and dialogue, a key mechanism underlying the development of critical consciousness" (Campbell and MacPhail 2002, p. 337). Likewise, rigidly authoritarian rules, didactic teaching methods that reduce opportunity for autonomy and critical thinking are contrary and prohibitive of the CC development process (Campbell and MacPhail 2002).

Group process—Some scholars discussed the need for small group discussions and interactions as an important tool to facilitate CC development (Hatcher et al. 2010; Watts and Abdul-Adil 1998). CC practice is characterized by group discussion that incorporates open-minded listening (that is, "listening with the willingness to have one's mind potentially changed by what one hears" (Cohen 2011, p. 414)), "dialogue, humility, respect, and critique" (Watts et al. 2011, p. 54) to allow group participants to move toward consensus of causal factors underlying the recurring oppressive characteristics of everyday life (Montero and Sonn 2009). At that point, the group can "begin to consider solutions aimed at the sociopolitical roots of the problem" (Watts et al. 2011, p. 54). The constructive and empowering group process allows a combination of tools to be utilized for consciousness-raising such as encouraging dialogue that promotes reflective questioning about the

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connections between personal and societal issues; the use of role plays and other participatory activities; grounding discussions within the daily, shared realities of those involved in the consciousness-raising process; co-constructing new and empowered understandings and identities; and, identifying potential solutions to local problems (Hatcher et al. 2010). Small groups also encourage a constructive group process in which participants are allowed the time and given encouragement to create a physically and psychologically safe space (Ginwright and James 2002) that permits participants to explore connections between personal and social problems, identify shared experiences, and receive social support, all of which greatly impact an individual's behavior and perception of reality (Gutierrez and Ortega 1991). The classroom and early learning settings seem to be an organic environment to incorporate the group processes needed for conscientization as CC has major impact on personal and collective identity.

Individuals develop a group identity as they "move from consciousness of themselves as oppressed individuals to the consciousness of an oppressed class" (Freire 2000, p. 174). The group identity and a sense of community provide support and acceptance from others who are also struggling (Hatcher et al. 2010). According to Gutierrez and Ortega (1991, p. 26), "[e]mpowerment theory assumes that if individuals understand the connectedness of human experience they will be more likely to work with others to alter social conditions." Thus, intra-group interaction and communication that incorporates a sense of belonging have been identified as empowerment techniques, potentially increasing communal efficacy for mobilizing activities and collective social action that promotes the common good over efforts towards individual achievement (Gutierrez and Ortega 1991; Hatcher et al. 2010; Thomas et al. 2014). Empowering the silenced to find their collective voice and liberate themselves is the overarching goal of consciousness-raising (Gutierrez and Ortega 1991); or, as Hardy-Fanta (1986, p. 123) describes, having "competent people working toward achieving their own ends through collective action." To accomplish similar goals,Watts et al. (2002) and Windsor et al. (2014a, b) have considered a process of civic learning in which participants develop community action projects that use participant-generated insights to change social systems. These studies may provide a blueprint for similar civic action projects within urban education curricula.

Action and identity development—Action has been identified as a tool for consciousness raising (Windsor et al., 2014a, b). Freire (2000, p. 73) noted that CC "results from the intervention in the world as transformers of that world". Civic engagement and sociopolitical action seem to shape how one perceives self, others and social injustices. As people challenge oppressive conditions within local sociopolitical contexts, a new understanding of themselves, other group members, and of those contexts arises (Garcia et al. 2009; Sonn and Fisher 1998). A person's identity becomes one of an active and engaged citizen, defined as "someone who has a sense of civic duty, feeling of social connection to their community, confidence in their abilities to effect change, as well as someone who engages in civic behavior" (Zaff et al. 2010, p. 737). Moreover, the collective action promotes solidarity with peers and solidarity allows disempowered groups to gain collective power.

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Part of developing CC includes the psychological process of empowerment that stems from altering one's perception of self in society (Gutierrez and Ortega 1991), incorporating the reclamation of devalued and lost identities (Watts and Serrano-Garcia 2003). "This includes the development of a sense of group identity, the reduction of feelings of self-blame for problems, an increased sense of responsibility for future events, and enhanced feelings of self-efficacy" (Gutierrez and Ortega 1991, p. 25). The reclamation of identity opposes a primary tool of oppression and social control, divide and conquer, facilitated by the internalization of inferior beliefs about one's self and one's group members (Speight 2007). Civic engagement helps to protect individual, families and communities from negative messages reproduced in society (Speight 2007; Thomas et al. 2014; Zaff et al. 2010). Thus, research seems to suggest a cyclical relationship between identity (both personal and collective) in that identity influences civic engagement and civic engagement develops one's identity (Thomas et al. 2014; Zaff et al. 2010).

The demarcations between the tools of conscientization are superficial; all the tools overlap. For example, reflective questions encourage dialogue that may occur within a group setting that challenges restrictive and oppressive social identities. "Identity, that basic sense of who we are that guides both our sense of ourselves and our behavior," and how we make sense of the world, "can be understood to be constituted through dialogue" (Saari 2002, p. 144). As one speaks and listens, the power of words shapes identity and perceptions of environmental contexts. Through this dialogical process, "the subject comes into being" (Maranhao 1990, p. 18). Conscientization incorporates a dialogical perspective of the self as a storyteller in search of shared narratives. Self-identities manifest through critical dialogue and action with similarly situated others in relationship which generates a common understanding of the nature of their experience (Goolishian and Anderson 2002). The altering of narratives and identities is a product of social exchange, such that "we are never more than the coauthors of the identities we construct narratively with others" (Goolishian and Anderson 2002, pp. 221–222). When people listen in a way that demonstrates that the speaker has something worth hearing, then the speaker's word and existence are validated simultaneously. "Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such a radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis" (Freire 2000, p. 87).

The unifying force is discovered when recognizing and acknowledging the greatness and power of the voices of others can be accomplished without diminishing one's own greatness and power (Anderson 2005). Conscientization, as an empowerment framework, depends on the idea that when individuals understand the interdependence of human experience - that taking care of me means taking care of you - they will be more likely to work together to challenge substandard social conditions for all (Gutierrez and Ortega 1991). However, when considering the interdependence of human experience, other conceptual ambiguities and inconsistencies challenge the CC theoretical framework. Ideas that require clarification or consideration include the exclusion of the oppressor, the absence of privilege, and intersectionality.

Exclusion of oppressor/privileged—Is CC only for oppressed populations? Since the initial formulations of CC, scholars have used CC in various contexts to understand how

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oppressed or marginalized populations: (1) reflect on and become critically aware of social, political, and economic oppression and the resulting social injustices; (2) identify and navigate the structural constraints and social inequities that limit human agency and well-being; and, (3) acquire the skills and resources needed to transform oppressive elements to create a just society (Ginwright and James 2002; Prilleltensky 2003 Watts and Abdul-Adil 1998; Watts et al. 1999, 2011). As such, some scholars limit their definition of CC to focus on oppressed or marginalized populations (Diemer et al. 2014; Ginwright and James 2002; Watts et al. 2011). For example,Diemer et al. (2014) define CC as how "oppressed or marginalized people think about and respond to inequitable sociopolitical conditions" (p. 15). Similarly, Baker and Brookins (2014) notes that CC is "concerned with the ways in which marginalized group members develop an understanding of oppressive societal structures and forces, and subsequently the motivation for individual and collective action to confront and change those structures and forces" (p. 1016). These limited definitions exclude oppressors and may inadvertently support the proposition that oppression is a problem for the oppressed to solve. When, in essence, CC is important for members of privileged groups who have greater access to resources and power and can operate as allies (Thomas et al. 2014). To achieve liberation, the primary focus of CC (Watts et al. 1999), it is imperative that those who may be privileged by the system of social injustice, unfair distribution of resources and opportunities, and inequity, be able to recognize unjust social processes and acquire the knowledge and skills needed for social change. Thomas et al. (2014) noted that CC would help individuals understand their role in a system of oppression, as members of either the privileged or stigmatized groups. Liberation requires true solidarity in which the oppressor not only fights at the side of the oppressed, but also takes a radical posture of empathy by "entering into the situation of those with whom one is solidary" (Freire 2000, p. 49). Thus, CC, with the goal of liberation, has the radical requirement that the oppressor, those who deny others the right to speak their word, and the oppressed, those whose right to speak has been denied, must collaborate to transform the structures that beget oppression (Freire 2000).

Absence of privilege—Another critical limitation of CC conceptualization is the failure to incorporate the concept of privilege. Some definitions only define CC as addressing oppression. For example,Garcia et al. (2009) define CC "as the ability to recognize and challenge oppressive and dehumanizing political, economic, and social systems." As an antidote to oppression, CC must address inequity which includes privilege. Moreover, the development of CC includes evaluating how one's privilege impedes the ability to empower and support those with less power and privilege, preventing empathy and inter-group collaboration needed to dismantle social hierarchies (Carolan et al. 2010). Some scholars have recognized the role of privilege in the maintenance of oppression by including privilege within CC's conceptualization. Watt (2007) notes that CC is an awareness of "one's own privileged status in relation to racism, sexism, ableism, c1assism, etc., on a personal and political level" (p. 116). Watt (2007) acknowledges that critical consciousness will not develop without engaging in difficult conversations that directly address what it means to be privileged. Likewise,Garcia et al. (2009) note that it is important to "allocate time to reflect on and address issues related to interlocking systems of oppression and privilege." Campbell and MacPhail's (2002) CC intervention demonstrated the Freirian approach in helping

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young people examine their social privilege (e.g., as males, heterosexuals, affluent) as well as their marginalization. Watts et al. (2011) also note that privileged youth could work towards a more just society if they learned about oppression, privilege, and the consequences of social injustice. Since privilege and oppression are mutually reinforcing, operating in a cyclical process, providing sustenance to the other, CC requires an examination of privilege as well as oppression.

Intersectionality—Related to the critique that CC, as it has been conceptualized by many, fails to include privilege and address oppressors is the idea that our identities are usually composed of overlapping and intersecting identities of privilege and oppression. In other words, an educated, rich, black, lesbian woman has intersecting identities of oppression (i.e., black, lesbian, woman) and intersecting and interlocking identities of privilege (i.e., able-bodied, rich, educated). With intersecting identities and variable experiences of oppression and privilege, it becomes nearly impossible to divide most people into categories of oppressed, oppressor, or privileged (Black and Stone 2005; Crenshaw 1989; Ferber 2012; McIntosh 2014). Although some group identities are more widely recognized as being oppressed or privileged, the experience of oppression and privilege is an individualized experience that varies by social context incorporating protective and risk factors (Thomas et al. 2014). Moreover, the idea of internalized oppression further complicates the oppressor/oppressee dichotomy in that target members of systemic inequity may unwittingly collude in their own oppression and the oppression of in-group members (Speight 2007) by thinking, feelings, and acting in ways that "demonstrate the devaluation of their group and of themselves as members of that group" (Hardiman and Jackson 1997, p. 21). Thus, it is important to not "sort individuals into stigmatized and non-stigmatized groups based on in-group identity" (Thomas et al. 2014, p. 488). Furthermore, intersectionality theory is used to denote the intersecting experiences of oppression with which members of multiple oppressed groups must contend (Crenshaw 1991; Viruell-Fuentes et al. 2012). Because systems of oppression are mutually reinforced and work in concert to produce inequality (Ferber 2009), analyses that focus on a single oppression will produce an inadequate representation of the social experience impacted by several oppressions simultaneously (Viruell-Fuentes et al. 2012).

Transformative Potential

Based on the review and critique of the literature, there is ample evidence that suggests the construct of CC requires clarification for research, education, and practice purposes. When synthesizing this review, it seems that critical consciousness, composed of reflection and action, is a fundamental and necessary skill to understand oppression and privilege (Watts and Abdul-Adil 1998). Praxis, the cyclical or simultaneous process of reflecting and acting, is needed to challenge oppression and privilege. Conscientization is the process that uses such tools as critical dialogue, reflective questions, and social action projects, to develop critical consciousness. These concepts seem to operate in tandem and to exist within a complex web of cause-and-effect. Despite the research on CC that has contributed to our understanding of CC and the wide usage of CC, the CC construct and theoretical framework remains vague, ambiguous and fragmented (Baker and Brookins 2014). Critical

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consciousness has roots in multiple disciplines which make the concept complex and difficult to interpret. Definitions differ on whether CC is an outcome or a developmental process and confuse CC, conscientização, praxis and the tools, strategies or techniques of the consciousness-raising process. Scholars incorporate various combinations of dimensions to define CC making it less likely that CC scholars are assessing the same construct as each other when referencing CC. The lack of a standardized definition makes it difficult to compare results across studies or to link CC to outcomes. Also, definitions tend to exclude oppressors and the examination of privilege and suffer from not incorporating the idea of intersectionality. These issues cause concern over the future and utility of critical consciousness theory, research, and practice (Goodman et al. 1998). If fundamental questions remain unanswered, CC scholars will continue to produce divergent theory and assessments of CC (e.g., Baker and Brookins 2014; Diemer et al. 2014; Jemal 2016; McWhirter and McWhirter 2016; Shin et al. 2016; Thomas et al. 2014). As such, the importance of critical consciousness as a key phenomenon of interest may be minimized unless theoretical and empirical issues are addressed with greater precision.

To address the conceptual limitations and inconsistencies outlined in this paper, one recommendation is for scholars to introduce conceptual models of constructs that are separate and distinct from critical consciousness and are identified as such to avoid the overuse of critical consciousness for varying and divergent ideas. As such, this critique provided the foundation and direction for the development of a new theoretical framework, transformative potential (TP), informed by the CC literature but also developed to address the theoretical limitations and inconsistencies of critical consciousness theory. For example, TP would not only apply to oppressed populations but also to the oppressor, the ally, and all those in between. Transformative potential includes social analysis of both forms of inequity: oppression and privilege. TP incorporates intersectionality, recognizing most individuals are some composition of hero and tyrant. Most importantly, TP acknowledges the interdependence of human existence, that the liberty and humanity of the oppressed is coupled with the liberty and humanity of the oppressor. Along these lines, the TP framework incorporates a developmental, eco-social approach (Bronfenbrenner 1994) to encompass the interrelationships of systems, meaning how micro practices are reflective of macro socio-political processes and vice versa. This approach also allows for the examination of internalized oppression and privilege, which has not been addressed in the CC literature. Transformative potential, as an interdisciplinary theoretical framework grounded in CC theory can provide a lens to understand how individuals are affected by internalized and structural oppression; to explore a family's intergenerational beliefs that support oppressive thinking and behaviors; or to promote community organizing and social activism efforts with faculty and students.

The systemic denial by those in power of patterns of discrimination by educational systems against students of color and their families or for affluent white individuals (e.g., legacy preferences (Larew 1991), perpetuate power imbalances and differential access to resources. The ultimate goals of incorporating transformative potential, a CC-based theoretical framework, into urban education is threefold: (1) to objectify and address issues of systemic inequity, (2) to produce an informed and civically engaged student body with the capacity to transform individuals, families, communities, institutions, and sociopolitical systems, and

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(3) to raise the critical consciousness of educators who are responsible for producing the leaders of the future. Freire (2000, p. 47) states that “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.” There is immense potential for transformation, from individuals to institutions to generations, if students educated in urban areas critically reflected on the oppressive conditions shaping his or her life and actively worked as an individual and in collaboration with like-minded others to create more equitable realities. Urban school settings could play a more active role in helping students and faculty: integrate history and causal reasoning; develop ability to recognize social patterns; recognize a sense of self differentiated from mainstream images; reflect on power dynamics by continuously examining how biases, assumptions and cultural worldviews influence perceptions of differences between individuals; increase capacity to effect social change; and develop partnerships to foster social justice (Garcia et al. 2009; Sakamoto and Pitner 2005; Zimmerman 1995). Freire used the CC pedagogy for the liberation of Brazilian peasants and, likewise, CC-based theoretical models, like transformative potential, are needed to transform systems and institutions that maintain and perpetuate oppression and to achieve a system of education that is just, equitable and liberating for all.

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