Invoking Precious Knowledge with Teacher Candidates to Reclaim the Past, Reassess the Present, and Revolutionize Future Practice

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Introduction

What counts as knowledge in public schools has been contested since their inception. However, reform efforts in recent decades have sought additional control over students', teachers', and communities' ways of knowing, acting, and speaking through compliance and commodification models of governance and evaluation (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Loewen, 2007; Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012). The continuing struggle for the students and community served by the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program (Cammarota and Romero, 2014) in Tucson, Arizona, is a reminder that the struggles for educational equity and justice are located within sociopolitical contexts that demand our attention, investigation, and advocacy. By engaging in an examination of the first K-12 ethnic studies program and its ultimate outlawing by state officials chronicled in the film, Precious Knowledge, educators and students are able to engage in critical dialogue that fosters interest in and understanding of the relationship of history, culture, and politics to American public education. It also illustrates many ways in which histories, cultures, and languages have been and continue to be marginalized or silenced. The film offers not only opportunities to study and identify the sociopolitical nature of knowledge, curriculum, and context, but also engenders empathy and action from those who teach culturally and linguistically diverse students (Carberry, 2014; Parkhouse, 2015; Ortega, 2014).

As the population of culturally and linguistically diverse US public school students increases, the demographics of the teaching population have remained largely unchanged: White, middle class, and monolingual (Banks, 2016). Teacher education programs must play a role in uncovering the legacy of oppression in education policy and curriculum and look to re-imagine how schooling can honor the histories, cultures, and languages students embody, embrace, and enact every day.
This chapter describes how two teacher educators have used the difficult history represented in Precious Knowledge as an opening to critical conversations around issues of the history of racism in public education. It then advocates for the role of sociopolitically conscious film as a central feature in teacher education programs and their relational commitments with school-community partners.

Critical Frames for Teaching, Learning, and Leading with Film

From critical multicultural perspectives, we conceptualize difficult history as a history that claims space and place in schools and other institutional settings because it calls into question dominant or “master” historical narratives. It does so by problematizing histories focused largely on the power, decisions, and changes of White men that traditionally deny or denigrate other his/her/stories in those settings. Within American public education, difficult histories can take the form of ethnic, transnational, regional, local, community, and/or personal his/her/stories, and serve as an important site for inquiry. They force a conversation with dominant historical narratives as well as the social, political, and economic structures that support them. Difficult histories do this by implicitly or explicitly identifying, critiquing, and disrupting nationalist and capitalist agendas, including who those agendas have served over time and how. This includes dismantling curricula based on heroes and holidays and that sanctions Manifest Destiny, Westward Expansion, and the Protestant work ethic as legitimate rationales for the dominance of White patriarchy, colonialism, and supremacy in American society.

Difficult histories are difficult precisely because educational, political, and business establishments are forced to concede power, space, and control in what knowledge is valued, how it is constructed, and who else has a voice in crafting public spaces, policies, and practices. We also mean the histories of peoples not represented, represented through tokenism, or represented within a binary construct of narratives of Western civilization (e.g., good versus evil, the haves versus the have-nots, the godly versus the pagan or godless, etc.). Difficult history humanizes people struggling for survival, power, and equality and asserts the importance of sociopolitical contexts in shaping those struggles. It is through the representation of and commitment to difficult histories that educational and public spaces become culturally sustaining, civically situated, and contextually considerate. Without the embrace of difficult histories, there cannot be recognition of the sociopolitical context of schooling, teaching, or learning and there cannot be a truly “public” education. By extension, there cannot be public schools that support the health, healing, and evolution of a democratic republic.

The Film

Precious Knowledge explores the last years (2008–2009) of Raza Studies/MAS program at Tucson High School in Arizona as well as the past and recent history
of the school-community organizing in Tucson. It chronicles the stories of the students and teachers associated with the program as well as educational leaders and policymakers and their perspectives on then Arizona House Bill 2281 (now A.R.S. § 15–112) designed to ban the MAS program. The success of the program is highlighted in both traditional and non-traditional measures: (1) with 93% of MAS students graduating, compared to the national rate among Mexican Americans at 48%, and (2) with many school-community events and personal testimonies of students and their families relating significant change in school and civic engagement. Going beyond statistics and testimony, the film shows MAS examples of culturally sustaining pedagogy and social justice education through two teachers' classrooms, highlighting the first time in the US that ethnic studies had been attempted systematically in a K-12 setting (i.e., besides Western European ethnic studies). While the teachers come from similar stances and draw on resources that include the use of Indigenous and Latinx concepts, iconography, texts, and understandings of the world (and people's place in it), they encourage their students to question dominant forms of knowledge in different ways through their content areas – English and Civics/Government – and in accordance with their own lived experiences and passions. The film implicates Arizona policymakers, most notably consecutive Superintendents of Public Instruction, Tom Horne and John Huppenthal, in their refusal to acknowledge or attend to both educational research and the voices of professional teachers, their students, and community stakeholders. Because the teachers invoke the arts and histories of Indigenous and Chican@ peoples, however, their pedagogical activities were labeled “anti-American” by policy makers and local media outlets, sending the message that if it cannot be created, controlled, or commodified by White people then it is against the “classic American values” that John Huppenthal implies are at the heart of public education in Arizona.

The film ends with the intensifying media campaigns and fear fueling anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona, including the outlawing of the MAS program despite protests and marches from the students, teachers, and community members. A quote on social change by Cesar Chavez is displayed just before the credits roll. The filmmakers make a link to the MAS curriculum on their official website. It provides teaching and activism resources sponsored by TeacherActivist Groups.org, which locates Precious Knowledge’s purpose as not one of merely documentary research, but also one of advocacy and organizing.

**The Role of Precious Knowledge in Classrooms**

Because the film both chronicles and promotes difficult history, it is particularly useful for public education stakeholders. It highlights marginalized perspectives on education and challenges dominant historical and political narratives in America as well as ways of knowing and learning in schools. Its recentness only adds to the urgency and applicability of considering what schooling, teaching, and learning
can look like when it is culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012), civically situated, and contextually considerate (Milner, 2010). From offering historically marginalized perspectives and questions from diverse peoples of the Americas, such as alternative readings of the “Founding Fathers,” the meaning of Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and the reasons for the Civil Rights Movement, the film offers teacher education students more critical and rigorous opportunities to locate social engineering and their place in it. Considering the importance of both spiraling and permeable curricula, we contend that the film can be used in a range of educational settings. For example, Parkhouse’s study (2015) illuminated how showing the film in social studies methods courses facilitated opportunities to delve more deeply into social action and social movements. Building on such work, we suggest that when viewed within introductory multicultural education or foundations courses Precious Knowledge can provide opportunities to develop a sociopolitical consciousness in pre-service teachers of all content areas. Because of its ability to invoke empathy (Picower, 2012; Marcus et al., 2010) and historical contexts of oppression to social justice education, teacher candidates can move through their program with these supporting their repertoires of practice (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003). Additionally, the film offers a powerful professional development and inquiry tool for teacher educators and practicing teachers as they enter into or refine equity and social justice trajectories in their classrooms and communities. Further, Precious Knowledge has been used as a school–community–university organizing tool for a student-led organization focused on creating a pipeline for students of color into education fields, as well as for a non-profit that supports undocumented students and their educational attainment.

The Role of Precious Knowledge in Teacher Education: A Case Study

In his book, Between the World and Me, Ta Nehisi Coates (2015) contends that “[t]he [American] Dream thrives on generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers. The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing” (p. 50). His work reflects a commitment to multiple ways of knowing, being, and acting beyond those in the academy, reminding us to consider the arts-based research and philosophic contributions of a wide range or cultural workers and artists. Precious Knowledge represents one such contribution that provides pedagogical opportunities for analysis and exploration through critical multicultural educational perspectives by educators committed to equity and social justice. In the sections that follow, we discuss our pedagogical approaches to using the film and its implications for both teacher candidates and teacher education programs. Specifically we examine how Precious Knowledge and other socio-politically conscious education films introduce teacher candidates to how they can reclaim, reimagine, and
reassess curriculum and teach in ways that affirm American pluralism and difficult histories (e.g., Loewen, 2007; Takaki, 2008; Zinn, 2005). This is an ongoing commitment to educate all students—especially those who are culturally and linguistically diverse and subsequently minoritized by our current systems—to prepare them for both personal and professional possibilities and democratic and global citizenship (Banks, 2016).

Sociopolitical and Cultural Considerations and Frameworks

To situate pedagogical moves with the film, we first attend to sociopolitical and cultural frameworks that redirect the focus of educational issues. For instance, we reframe the achievement gap and its focus on educational outcomes by focusing on the opportunity gap, revealing the inequitable structures and inputs of the educational system (Milner, 2010, pp. 7–8). The critical areas of Milner’s (2010) opportunity gap framework (pp. 13–15) require teacher candidates and teacher educators to attend to the racial, cultural, and class-based realities of students, teachers, families, and communities.

Another important way that opportunity gaps can be addressed is through culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). CSP provides a powerful alternative to the “evermore explicit deficit perspectives, policies, and pedagogies … [with] the quite explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society based on White, middle-class norms of language and cultural being” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). CSP explicitly requires supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in both practice and perspective for students and teachers and satisfies the racial, cultural, and contextual demands of applying opportunity gap perspectives to schooling, teaching, and learning. It also adds focused attention to language plurality and perception. According to Paris (2012), CSP “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 95). A key element of CSP is developed from one of Ladson-Billings’ (2006) three elements of culturally relevant pedagogy—sociopolitical (or critical) consciousness—which is of particular interest because it insists on contextually situated nature of living, growing, and learning.

In locating the ends of social justice education, Bree Picower (2012) explains that because teaching from a social justice perspective “is a political act situated in cultural, racial, economic, political tensions,” then “educators … must have a political analysis of how inequality, oppression, and power operate as a starting place for social justice teaching” (p. 4). This sees the role of the teacher to identify and eliminate disparities and oppression in order to achieve a more democratic society (Picower, 2012) and implies both Ladson-Billings’ notion of sociopolitical consciousness and the ability to identify colorblind, meritocratic, deficit, and culturally dominant or oppressive mind-sets and actions in schools and society (Milner, 2010).
Building on such insights, Costes reminds us that American social, political, and economic institutions depend on and demand known commodities. They have a history of commodifying people and things in order to own or control them. It is at the heart of many of our policies, practices, and the policing—or assessment—of them. In the process of commodification, we compartmentalize, capture, and reduce what is and could be and make what has to be. It is the capitalist machine behind the myth of the American Dream and what drives education policies like those confronting the MAS students and teachers.

What has to be is in the interests of a capitalism that has its roots in the slave trade and current forms in neoliberalism—those people, privatization forces, and structures—demanding an austere or high-stakes brand of accountability and standardization for the accumulation of wealth and cultural dominion (Sleeter, 2008, 2013). The continued privatization of public education disproportionately positions and elevates the wants, comforts, and beliefs of White people in boardrooms over those of diverse students and teachers in classrooms.

If public education stakeholders spanning classrooms, boardrooms, and the community do not work actively against the commodification of curriculum, teaching, and assessment, the opportunity gap will continue to grow. Through the commodification of public schooling, teacher and student actions become rote, even scripted; this in turn, erodes the profession of teaching, the art of teaching, and the relationships teaching depends on and develops for multidirectional learning and civic participation. This is a daily reality in US schools, particularly for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

It is within this context, where violence, aggression, and control are inflicted on our students, teachers, and communities with such great regularity that it is normalized that exploring difficult history through film yields important opportunities to locate and interrogate our positions as public education stakeholders. Given the disproportionate number and intensity of these attacks on people of color, Precious Knowledge makes plain the horrors of current subjugation in American public education and invites viewers into “something murkier and unknown.”

**Locating Ourselves – Paths and Positions**

By interrogating and attending to our own identities and cultural positions (Müller, 2007, 2015), we assert the subjective interpretations and biases inherent in all educational research and assessment (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2000), and respect the multiple readings and interests that participants bring with them into these experiences of historical representation. This is parallel to the writing of our colleagues in Chapter 7 who also engage in the important act of sharing their identities and its relationship to their work. Likewise, we find it imperative to locate the passion, power, and privilege we bring to this work, and offer our own stories to students as examples of how educators come to situate themselves within a praxis and reflexivity necessary for social justice teaching.
Mark

My own path to this work is as the only child of a Christian mother and Jewish father, who were both university administrators. I grew up in the rural and economically depressed outskirts of a college town in Appalachia. The center of family life, however, was in Cincinnati, Ohio, where we traveled to regularly to maintain a close connection with extended family. Because some of my family are Black and multiracial, I also learned about how race, racism, and racial battle fatigue impacted what was possible in many spheres of Ohio from an early age.

College came as a welcome relief from the relative isolation I felt growing up. I chose the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona, in part because of its reflection and embrace of American pluralism in ways I did not see as possible elsewhere at the time. My friends there were from all over the Southwest and Mexico, and I learned much from them, as well as from my studies in Anthropology and Humanities, where Kiowa author, N. Scott Momaday, Dr Donna Swain, and other faculty urged us to question our world through the oral tradition, cultural lenses, and the arts, and where travels to Egypt and Mexico were made possible.

My time at the University of Arizona gave me entrance into new possible worlds and taught me how to negotiate them with my lived experience, not in spite of it. It held me accountable for my position in society in ways that no standardized test ever could. As a White male, I saw the sustained opportunities I have had through systems of White supremacy and patriarchy. Prior to living in the Southwest, my world revolved around White male heroes paraded and applauded consistently in school, religious services, film, media, sports, money, and product branding. My time in Tucson helped me push behind and beyond that conditioning, while not eschewing my past or feeling guilty for it. Instead, I came to understand it as a lever for learning and change. After graduation I moved back to Appalachia where I became a high school English teacher – the most applied opportunity I could find to be a cultural worker, broker, and translator. I taught at a public alternative high school in West Virginia, just a few hours drive from where I grew up.

When my wife was offered a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Cincinnati, we moved again and I began my doctoral studies where I was able to work with a public high school that one of my cousins had attended. I worked with students and teachers there to develop an afterschool literacy and leadership community. The community grew and became a catalyst for equity and social justice organizing among like-minded individuals and institutions throughout the region. In this process, I met Emilio who introduced me to Precious Knowledge the year it was released.

Currently, I teach at a large public university in the Northeast, where some of the highest achievement gaps in the country exist. As I locate my social identities, educational history and trajectories with my students, I pair those lived experiences and their storying with examples of difficult histories that illuminate what non-White curriculum, teaching, knowledge, and evaluation can look like. This leads us to Precious Knowledge.
Emilie

I once described myself as “vanilla” in referring to my White, middle-class upbringing. I was raised in a Northern Kentucky suburb of Cincinnati. Raised by two working parents, I attended a top ranked public school district, excelled in school, and rarely questioned the authority of schooling.

During my final semester at a small liberal arts college, I took a sociology class on US/Mexico Border Studies. I spent a week in El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico. The “moment” that hooked me happened in a bilingual school. How had I spent nearly four years as an education major without having considered students whose first language wasn’t English? I decided to pursue a master’s in bilingual education. From that border experience, my astonishment of how such a small river could be exploited to reduce humans to objects of a twisted political notion of “border security,” pointed me in a new direction as a teacher committed to social justice.

Teaching in a high poverty urban district continued to lay the groundwork for my interest in diversity and social justice. When I started my master’s program at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), I had taught kindergarten for two years, but had not yet considered its relationship to social justice. I had professors who helped me contextualize my teaching within a framework of critical pedagogy. They helped me see past the “differences” between my students and me, and understand how such differences reveal unearned privilege, and the complexities of dealing with these issues in a politically charged profession.

My travels to Southern Mexico were also significant to my development. I spent part of three consecutive summers in Oaxaca prior to beginning my master’s program. Submerging myself in a foreign culture and language, forming friendships, and visiting places of sacred Indigenous history were powerful markers of my appreciation for the diversity of the human experience.

After completing my master’s, I taught Spanish in grades K-5. No Child Left Behind was unfolding as the law of the land, and while I was insulated from its reach as a “special area” teacher, I was suddenly breathing the heavy air of stress induced by standardized tests, accountability, administrative surveillance, and an unapologetic factory-like structure to the school day. I spent my planning periods reading articles on anything related to education, schooling, and social justice. Soon, I set my sights on New Mexico State’s PhD program in critical pedagogy.

As a doctoral student, I found my niche in education, welcoming the mentorship from my professors and partners in my apprenticeship in a university-school partnership called “Project MOVEMOS” (O’Donnell and Gallegos, 2006). I loved it! It kept me “grounded” in the world of public schooling and served as professional development that allowed me to “try out” teaching in higher education.

I returned home to write my dissertation and begin my position at UC. I met Mark, learning I had a colleague who shared my enthusiasm for the “borderlands.” If the two of us, from this “vanilla” region of the US, could be so moved by our “borderlands” experiences, then so too could our students. Precious Knowledge has
served as a catalyst for our students’ awakening to the commitment of learning and teaching difficult histories.

Relocating with Others – Pedagogical Movements with Students and Film

*Precious Knowledge* offers focused time and attention with the experiences of many school and community members occupying various positions in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD), as well as state policymakers. TUSD is a majority Latinx/Chican@ district, the second largest in the state of Arizona; both the city and the school district have a history of civil rights activism. This is juxtaposed with a state that has a long history of White domination and oppression of Brown and Black bodies and minds. Through individual and collective moments with educators, students, and their families in the film, examples for reclaiming and reimagining schooling, teaching, and learning – what they could look like, sound like, and value – stand in sharp contrast to a state and country intensely focused on claiming its commitments to freedom while actively working against it for particular groups of people. As TUSD educators invoke “precious knowledge” of cultures, language, and histories present in the Americas long before they held that name (or Western civilization drew lines and laid claim to the lands therein), the threat of equity-oriented change becomes too much for state and school board policymakers to bear. The supposed simple truths they espouse to live by and govern with are made murky and multifaceted as American Dream propaganda and policy decisions are exposed as severely lacking both in evidence and logic.

As teacher educators, we teach the multicultural or “diversity” foundations courses within the teacher education programs at our respective universities; both large, research universities located in the Midwest and Northeast. Our students are primarily White and middle class. Often, beneath the surface of their enthusiasm for teaching exists unexamined privilege, political apathy, and deficit orientations toward people of color, and toward minoritized groups in general (Sesnoy and DiAngelo, 2012; Valencia, 1997). Like Picower (2012), we also find that our students unconsciously resort to “tools of whiteness” to justify such privilege, inaction, and stereotyping the “other.” Milner (2010) places the onus on us as teacher educators to craft experiences of self and social discovery in pursuit of teacher candidates’ sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

We understand that assuming our students will latch on to the same interests that have driven us to pursue work in social justice education is misguided. After all, the foundation courses we teach in diversity address a wide swath of topics that can resonate with students by applying lenses of race, class, language, gender, ethnicity, and so on, to the work of teachers, schools, and education policy. While *Precious Knowledge* certainly highlights one specific story within a specific cultural context, we employ the film not only to introduce the context of oppression of Latinx youth and the cruelty of white-washed, English-only education
policy, but apply those concepts of oppression, White supremacy, and xenophobia to the broader aims of the course. Through the film and the difficult history it invokes, we leverage our passion for the borderlands to gain entry to our students’ starting points for considering the significance of developing a sociopolitical consciousness across educational contexts. At the heart of this work is the recognition that we are all historical beings, as Baldwin and Mead (1974) make clear: “If history were past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present … you and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history” (p. 25).

Reclaiming the Past

On the first day of class, we ask students to identify the books, films, music, and shows that meant the most to them growing up and why. This gives us a tangible starting place for discussions around locating cultural norms. We too share some of our favorite movies as children and young adults that were part of a Hollywood curriculum of White Savior films (Hughes, 2014); we share the way they both impacted our reading of the world, and where and why our views began to change. Following this, we ask our students to brainstorm and record everything they know, or think they know, about the Southwest United States. Common responses tend to focus on the arid climate, basic demography, and language. Other responses, although less frequent, acknowledge immigration as relevant to this region and basic history related to the US/Mexico War in the nineteenth century.

It is rare for students to express understanding of the cultural and political complexities of the Southwest and its people; that in 1846 the “border” crossed people and not the other way around is a foreign concept to our students; that Latinx students are obstructed from learning about the Indigenous beauty of their ancestry or the unique influence of the Spanish in violently shaping the course of the Southwest identity; that Latinxs and Chican@Js played a substantial role in promoting civil rights, and continue to do so, is not typically a part of our students’ consciousness. On one memorable occasion, a student offered, “What do I know about the Southwest? John Wayne and Billy the Kid.” Such examples that rely on White male icons representing an expansive region with many peoples, histories, and perspectives, are commonplace each semester. However, Previous Knowledge, and geographical history activities (e.g., Thornton, 2013), offer considerable insight and new knowledge for our students to consider difficult history and then apply to the larger back-drop of social justice education.

Reassessing the Present

Because the majority of our students come from White, middle-class backgrounds, where schooling “worked” for most of them, the curriculum and pedagogy they encountered seemed “commonsense” (Kumashiro, 2004). They saw themselves in the curriculum, their teachers came from similar backgrounds, and their parents
often held the cultural and social capital to ensure their needs were met in schools (Persell, 2010). These experiences form their "tools of whiteness" (Picower, 2012), making it difficult for them to empathize with students of color whose histories and identities are marginalized and often erased from curriculum and teaching (Bell, 2010). A significant goal is for students to develop an empathy that halts the tools of whiteness they use to construct deficit-oriented explanations of why students of color "fail" at school (Picower, 2012, Valencia, 1997).

Precious Knowledge exposes the institutional forces at work that undermine the opportunity for Latinx students to experience culturally sustaining pedagogy (Parkhouse, 2015). Not only do the teachers of MAS explicitly engage their students in critical examination of these structures, and consequently engage our students as they watch, the opponents of MAS are depicted to expose their role in these structures as well. In effect, we use this film to help our students begin to detect the ways in which a White, meritocratic school policy framework undermines the sociopolitical contexts of students of color, perpetuating the opportunity gap (Milner, 2010).

The film introduces a difficult history for students to begin to reconsider the role of language, culture, politics, race and racism, xenophobia, power, and White privilege in American society. Using Socratic discussions, journaling, and student-directed "chalk talks," where important quotes, questions, and associations are identified and posted, we engage in intentional, reflective discussions. We also ask questions to link the specific contexts of cultural and political oppression featured in the film with the broader spectrum of systems of oppression in US schooling. Through these discussions, we offer clarifications, and examine reflex rebuttals rooted in mere "opinion" through a critical theoretical lens (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012).

In our experience, students often appear stunned at the trauma inflicted on MAS students portrayed in the film. Yet, when we facilitate focused reflection through follow up assignments such as a racial or cultural autobiography and critical analysis of a current issue in education policy, students begin to make connections between broader forms of institutional oppression and the specific context featured in the film. Reaching beyond the sociopolitical identities of our students, we also ask them to examine the role of the teacher as they see it play out in the film. In posing this question, we ask students to interrogate what teachers do beyond the formal curriculum. Students are asked to consider the purposes for schooling reflected in the teachers' justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004) in both their own actions and what they aim to cultivate in the students in the MAS program. In so doing, students begin to wrestle with the challenges of engaging in the intellectual inquiry of the profession (Bradshaw, 2014). What stands out in these assignments and discussions is students' admiration for the pedagogy they witness in the film and also, an empathy that was not present prior to the film. Their tools of whiteness begin to diminish as the empathy turns upside down the "common sense" approach to considering the role of curriculum and teachers (Kumashiro, 2004; Camp and Oesterreich, 2010).
Revolutionize Future Practice

For most teacher candidates, Precious Knowledge and our respective theoretically informed “diversity” courses, are the first opportunity to see what ethnic studies and culturally sustaining pedagogies can look like in K–12 classrooms. The MAS teachers present models for what teaching, learning, and leading from those commitments means. Their use of culturally sustaining pedagogy, through such texts as the bilingual poem, “In Lak’ech” (Valdez, 1990) that Mr Acosta uses to foster an affirming classroom community, can be considered a call to action for teachers and teacher educators alike because it spans traditional borders of language, national identity, and ethnic history.

Using a role-play activity of the many people and groups involved in the MAS controversy, as well as reflective and advocacy writing activities, developed by Teacher Activist Groups (2012, pp. 8–14), we support students in deepening their empathy for all stakeholders involved and expand the kinds of civicly engaged activities that offer examples of multicultural and community-based approaches to teaching and learning. These in turn, support subsequent student-led discussions, debates, artistic renderings with “gallery walk and talks,” and other “play spaces” in which our students present, such as workshops or mini-conferences with campus and/or with school–community partners. This way teacher candidates are not only able to identify practices they saw promoting new kinds of learning and community in the film, but get experience proposing, developing, and attempting to enact new multicultural practices with sociopolitical positioning in mind. In this process, teacher candidates learn how to make explicit their positionality to their students and colleagues. At the same time, they are challenged to provide similar and sustained opportunities for their students or colleagues to re-evaluate and locate themselves through an evolving sociopolitical consciousness. There is mutual renewal here for teacher educators as well as we are reminded of or learn something new from the experimentation and social innovation of our students.

Limitations of the Film

Precious Knowledge, we contend, challenges the “dominant master narrative” and can be read as offering a “new totalizing counter-narrative” through its depiction of who is in the right and who is in the wrong (Barone, 2006, p. 222). While the film offers important ways into locating the sociopolitical nature of public education and new possible ways of conceiving of teaching and learning, it does so in clear opposition to the dominant political power structure. There is no attempt to humanize policymakers, such as Tom Horne and John Huppenthal, rather an unflinching commitment to hold them accountable for making decisions from on high, away from any sustained commitment to seeing or hearing the realities of the MAS program for students and teachers. Where or how could their views...
be read as part of faith, spiritual, and/or patriotic commitments based on where they come from? A role-play activity (e.g., Teacher Activist Group, 2012, pp. 8–14) is useful in providing an opportunity to consider these beliefs and where they come from. Also, how else could the film have offered more than a good versus evil binary?

With this unapologetic partisan angle of the film, we do take the opportunity to facilitate discussion with our students about the diverse and dynamic nature of knowledge itself. While students often plea for “unbiased” teaching resources, they do so with an assumption that their prior learning through K–12 schooling was just that: neutral (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012). This sense of curricular neutrality masks the difficult histories that are, at best, shoved to the margins of textbooks (Bell, 2010). A goal of our courses is to develop a critical consciousness within our students that teaching is always a political act (Nieto, 2000; Picower, 2012). In this light, we are candid in presenting Precious Knowledge as a counter-narrative and example of what Barone (2006) describes as “outlaw art,” rather than apologize for it. Bell’s (2010) “Storytelling Project Model” provides language for students to use when examining their previously held assumptions or critiquing the one-sided focus of the film. Applying Bell’s (2010) model to the film, we offer students an opportunity to examine it as a “resistance story.” As a counter to “stock stories” that “are a set of standard, typical, or familiar stories held in reserve to explain racial dynamics in ways that support the status quo” (p. 29), resistance stories “draw from a cultural/historical repository of narratives by and about people and groups who have challenged racism and injustice; stories that we can learn from and build on to challenge stock stories that we encounter today” (p. 61). Through Bell’s model and the lens of difficult history, students begin to understand that the arguments of MAS opponents are a part of the dominant cultural narrative, saturating their own collective consciousness as members of the dominant culture. Thus, the one-sided nature of the film may be considered a limitation for portraying the opponents in such a harsh light as to exclude the possibility that they are motivated not by malice, but by deeply held beliefs about patriotism and American identity. Yet, the opponents’ arguments are the “stock story,” and we contend that exposing our students to a difficult history in the form of a “resistance story” significantly deepens their sociopolitical consciousness of the historical legacy of racism in Latinx communities.

The Role of Sociopolitically Conscious Films in White-dominated Spaces: Implications and Possibilities for Teacher Educators and Secondary Social Studies Teachers

Teacher Educators

While foundations courses in multicultural education can be overwhelming to teacher educators and students alike with a host of pressing topics to be addressed
sociopolitically conscious films bring these topics together and to life through concrete experiences with the voices, faces, minds and bodies, struggling against inequity, discrimination, and oppression.

Also, by placing the ethnic histories and identities of its students and community at the center of learning, the MAS program made the study of the self, other, and society the curriculum by which academic content was realized. Teacher educators in foundations courses can leverage its success (Caninrota and Romero, 2014) to begin unraveling the strands of deficit thinking of people of color (Valencia, 1997). Students can then begin to re-imagine curriculum as culturally sustaining rather than “neutral” and stagnant. In this sense, the film is an invitation to teacher candidates and public education stakeholders to consider new ways of schooling and teaching.

One of the ways to sustain and deepen inquiry and organizing commitments across organizations for sociopolitical consciousness and educational change is through shared film screenings. By pairing films or supporting a film series in teacher education and school-community spaces, “documentary and dialogue” sessions can support public education stakeholders in identifying and addressing the sociopolitical contexts in which we live and learn. Films such as Color of Fear, Stolen Education, We Still Live Here, Dying to Live, The E Word, Defies Measurement, and Tested highlight opportunity gaps and attend to both difficult history and Barone’s (2006) conceptions of arts-based research, including the outlaw art, as well as offer new possibilities for shared professional development, educational leadership (broadly defined), and advocacy or activism. This includes the idea that teacher education programs should consider supporting the development of sociopolitically conscious films of their own where teacher education students attend to school-community partner voices, realities, and needs through video advocacy projects. A pre-teaching critical service learning course has been developed to do just that in partnership with the human rights video training nonprofit, witness.

Secondary Social Studies Teachers

Precious Knowledge offers an opportunity for middle and high school students to pull the thread of the past into the present. Agarwal-Rangnath (2013) offers inviting teaching methods to support students in making such relevant connections in social studies classrooms. Further, proponents of democratic education assert that a necessary condition for developing social justice-oriented citizens (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004) is a curriculum that matters to young people and allows them to practice democracy authentically (Brashaw, 2014; Stetzlau, 2011). Engaging students in a Socratic Seminar (Tredway, 1995) centered on a fundamental question elicited from the film can deepen student thinking about the historical connections to the lives of their contemporaries. Guiding questions such as, whose stories matter in history, what defines citizenship, who is responsible for racial
and economic inequality, are young people citizens, are just a few of many questions to enter into the Socratic method of discussion. Structured Academic Controversy, another discussion method (Rossi, 2006) also aligns well, positioning students to further research and endorse a particular perspective from the film. Such a discussion method also can help to address the one-sided nature of the documentary by requiring deeper research and discussion of the opponents of the MAS program. These discussion methods, rooted in the cultivation of democratic citizenship, used in tandem with a story of young people engaged in a participatory, social justice orientation to such citizenship, sets the stage for students to make relevant connections between the difficult histories of the past and continued struggles in oppressed communities.

Perspective-taking is another significant element of social studies instruction, particularly when examining difficult and marginalized histories (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2013). Enlivening the classroom with methods such as role play (Bigelow, 2006) and process drama (Rosler, 2010; Schneider, Crumpler, and Rogers, 2006), places students in the “shoes” of historical figures and/or contemporaries. Through such methods, students are tasked with becoming deeply familiar with and connected to people relevant to the context they have studied. Creating roles and scenarios based off the multiple people and perspectives featured in films lets students dive deep into one of them, leverage what they learn from the film, and make authentic and realistic connections to the broader concepts of history, culture, social justice, and citizenship, as they interact in a hypothetical setting established by the teacher. Teachers can play a key role in guiding and processing key concepts and issues at multiple points during the activity.

The poignant reflections by Carberry (2014) and Ortega (2014) of students (and teacher) from an Oakland, California, high school standing in solidarity with the MAS students and teachers stand as an example of integrating social studies and language arts into a current issue with the historical backdrop threaded throughout. Socratic seminar, graphic organizers, NPR (National Public Radio) interviews, direct communication with people in Tucson, and a youth leadership conference presentation, all point to the art of teaching difficult histories through the context of a current event with direct connections to students’ lived experiences. It is a “unit” crafted in response to the questions most pertinent to these particular students, a brilliant display of the craft of teaching that weaves traditional academic standards into a complex issue that cultivates a social justice orientation to citizenship and learning in young people.

It is our profound hope that by invoking Precious Knowledge, more teacher education programs will include films on difficult or marginalized histories in order to problematize what has been, is, and could be in schools and society. Even more importantly are the ways that “precious knowledge” is shared, advocated for, and attended to in policy and practice. Without inquiry, group, and educational partnership development across traditional borders and roles, there can be no mechanism for sociopolitical consciousness to spread, spur, and sustain educational
change. Critically conscious films documenting and advocating difficult history become powerful tools in initiating and promoting their development.

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References


