

## Social Justice Lenses and Authentic Student Voices:

Enhancing Leadership for Educational Justice

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*Abstract: In addressing the issue of educational inequality and achievement gap, this research article demonstrates that critical implications could be gleaned from listening to the authentic voices of students by using a social justice lens. A social justice perspective in educational leadership is essential in evaluating the impact of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, poverty, and disability on the educational outcomes of students in urban schools.*

Recent studies have documented that students in urban schools face many educational, social, economic, and cultural challenges that are associated with race, ethnicity, and poverty (Haycock, 1998; Haycock, Jerald, and Huang, 2001; Singham, 2003). In addition, it is common knowledge now that achievement gap is a reality between mainstream students and minority students and many efforts are underway to study, understand, and dismantle the existing educational inequality (Lopez, Magdaleno, & Reis, 2006; Barone, 2006; Portes, 2005). There is also no disagreement that we need to learn as much as we can about the growing numbers of

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students of color and English language learners who attend urban schools so that we can increase their level of academic achievement. Miller and Endo (2004) shared the stories of urban English language learners (ELL) through a research technique called narrative inquiry. They explained the plethora of problems they encounter in the U.S. school system and recommended steps teachers can follow to help ELL students become successful in a new culture and a new language. While Lazar (2004) called for “culturally sensitive literacy teachers” in urban schools, Diller and Moule’s (2005) recent primer on cross-cultural teaching accentuates the significance of recognizing culture, understanding cultural differences in the classroom, and defining cultural competency.

Although there have been well-documented and well-argued positions that knowledge about urban students, standard-based instructional perspectives, and other educational reforms are dwarfed by the “power of urban poverty” (Anyon, 2005) and cannot transform the society’s fundamental inequities (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985), school leaders can contribute in many significant and practical ways in unpacking and approaching the challenge of diversity issues and pave the road for social justice to improve the schooling of urban students. While educational agencies and research institutions attempt sophisticated approaches in finding solutions to the “achievement gap,” we demonstrate in this research article that critical information could be gleaned from listening to the authentic voices of students by using a social justice lens. A social justice perspective in educational leadership is essential in evaluating the impact of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, poverty, and disability on the educational outcomes of students in urban schools (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Moule, 2005).

### *Using Social Justice Lenses*

In this article, we employ the lenses of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1974; Shor, 1987; Gadotti, 1994; Wink, 1997), funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001), politics of caring and connectedness (Valenzuela, 1999), resiliency (Trueba, 1999), and social networking (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) to analyze students’ experiences and to depict the social conditions prevalent in urban schools that directly impact the achievement of poor students and minority students (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1988; Shor & Pari, 1999; Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll & Rose, 2001; Fehring & Green, 1987; Heffernan, 2004; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). In addition, we use the critical and political construct of “inquiry as stance” for understanding and analyzing the purposes, practices, and policies of school and its impact on students’ life opportunities (Cochran-Smith, 2004). In

taking inquiry as stance, we view students' learning as central, gather and analyze data from classroom and school contexts, value students' cultural and linguistic resources, and advocate for students and their families (Cochran-Smith, 2004). The following are brief definitions of these "social justice lenses":

***Funds of Knowledge***

It refers to the interconnections or networks of the students' identities, schools, families, neighborhoods, communities, and overall lived experiences that they have acquired through life. Minority students have a variety of community and household experiences that shape the strengths they bring in the classrooms. There are always networks of friends, relatives, and community contacts that facilitate different types of economic assistance, labor cooperation and referral, and societal advancement and participation. It is important that school leaders acknowledge these "funds of knowledge" and use these resources to facilitate student learning and intellectual advancement. The students' multiple identities, social backgrounds, and lived experiences are dynamic sources of "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001; Moll, 1994).

***Resiliency***

It is a process by which poor, diverse, and immigrant children and their families learn to rely upon their culture, family, peers, and ethnic community as sources of support, frames of reference, and shields from many of the negative attitudes that instill discrimination and foster marginalization. It has been shown that students who maintain a strong self-identity with their social and cultural community are able to do well in school in spite of social inequities and other odds against them (Trueba, 1999). School leaders should recognize the notion of resiliency so that they may be guided on how to complement and build the strength of students' positive personal traits, self-esteem, and dispositions.

***Politics of Caring and Connectedness***

Valenzuela (1999) highlighted the importance of what she refers to as the "politics of caring," a concept that emphasizes the need to establish reciprocal relations of respect and support between students and educators. She explained that students and teachers need to develop positive feelings of trust and nurture meaningful relationships in order to enhance their learning and academic success. It has been found that students who have strong connections with friends and school personnel including their teachers and counselors are "more likely to resist the pull of gangs that offer an alternative form of connection for alienated

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students (Oscher & Fleischman, p. 84, 2005). Valenzuela also insisted that before students can *care about* school they believe that they have to be *cared for*, respected, and valued by their peers, teachers, and administrators. School leaders need to be concerned with the content of what their students are learning and its relevance to their lives and to the larger society.

### ***Social Networking***

Stanton-Salazar (2001) recognized the valuable role of parents and encourages language minority students to develop bilingual-bicultural forms of identity that can serve to strengthen their social values, bridge cultures, and allow them to excel academically. Recognizing that *ganas* (motivation) and potentials are not always enough to produce positive results in a highly competitive educational environment, Stanton-Salazar also stressed the need to nurture links or social networking with “institutional agents” such as teachers, counselors, and mentors who can guide the way for new educational opportunities. The support provided by these institutional agents can serve to defend their interests, provide them with constructive advice, and guide their overall progress.

### ***Critical Pedagogy***

Critical pedagogy is a viewpoint concerned with the development of critical consciousness that is brought about not through intellectual effort alone but through “praxis”—through the authentic union of action and reflection (Freire, 1974; 1998). It is not a “lifeless methodological imperative” of teaching abstract forms of knowledge but an educational process in which dialogue, vision, and compassion are attentive to the democratic rights and conditions of students (Giroux, 1983; 1988). For example, it views literacy development in urban schools more broadly as a process that includes not only learning how to decipher or read words but also “reading the world.” This means understanding the historical, sociological, political, and cultural contexts that in turn influences one’s language and literacy development (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Shor (1999) asserted that critical pedagogy involves questioning received knowledge and immediate experience with the goals of challenging inequality and developing an activist citizenry” (p.11). He drew the connection between learning and social change by emphasizing the need to take a “moral stand on what kind of humane society and democratic education we want” (p. 23).

### ***Critical Inquiry as Stance***

By incorporating a critical inquiry as stance, school leaders would

view its community of teachers and learners with confidence that they have the competence to expand their reasoning, seek out multiple perspectives, and become active thinkers (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Consequently, school administrators, teachers, and students could learn to question the established knowledge, interrogate multiple viewpoints, focus on sociopolitical issues, and take action to promote social justice (Seely-Flint, Lewison, & Van Sluys, 2002). School leaders need to be attentive to students' "voices of pain and voices of hope" in urban schools (Rabow, 2004) to increase social awareness and focus their policy, curriculum, and instruction to meet the needs of urban students.

### **Methods and Procedures**

Our study employed a qualitative research technique called "narrative inquiry." The qualitative process involved five steps: (1) identification of the urban students who are willing to share their experiences, (2) development of the writing prompt that would draw out the students' experiences, (3) collection and reading of the students' narratives, (4) description and analysis of the content of the students narratives, and (5) drawing out educational implications emerging from the description and analysis.

### ***Participants in the Study***

We asked 35 post-secondary students who recently graduated from urban high schools located in south central Los Angeles to write about their educational experiences. All thirty-five (35) students attended urban public schools and managed to graduate from high school. They all attended an urban university in Los Angeles where the researchers or authors of this article taught. Although all the participants in the study attended a university when this study was conducted, their relatively successful educational journeys were neither smooth nor seamless. Most of these students were older, non-traditional students of color whose educational experiences were tattered and thwarted by serious obstacles related to the attributes of poverty, gender bias or racial discrimination. While thousands of students in similar circumstances overwhelmed by social inequities in urban schools dropped out of school, our unique participants in the study decided to stay in school and fight for their right to achieve a quality education. As a result, they gained a critical understanding of the need for educational reform and social justice.

Their personal experiences and attributes provided us with lessons that we can use to improve the schooling of students in urban schools. These lessons could serve as inspiration for other students who never made it to, or through college.

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The participants in the study demonstrated “success stories” that reflect their rich funds of knowledge, resiliency, and critical view and appreciation of the positive influences public schools have offered them. While it will be equally important to hear the voices of the less successful urban students, the examined experiences of the relatively successful participants in the current study provided the school contexts, personal attributes, and experiences that could facilitate their achievement in urban settings despite their low socioeconomic and/or ethnic minority backgrounds.

Current literature in education has documented the “inequity within diversity, inequity within assessment, inequity within standards, and inequity within curriculum” (Barone, 2006; England, 2005; Portes, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004; Kozol, 1992). The authors of the current study were interested in examining how much of these “inequities” were perceived by the participants throughout their educational experiences and how they coped to achieve their university education. They were asked to respond to this writing prompt:

Think about your experiences in your elementary, secondary, and college schooling that have an impact on your understanding of the different forms of inequities that exist in our society. Write a reflective essay by describing your experiences and explaining how the inequities that you perceived may have or may not have contributed to any of your success or failure. Include in your essay how your understanding of these inequities influences the way you understand and analyze the events, situations, objects, and ideas around you.

The overall objective of this prompt is to elicit among the students their personal experiences which may include the major events, people, role models, teachers, subjects, peer groups and other social challenges that characterized their schooling from elementary through college. The writing prompt was designed to provide the participants with an opportunity to interpret their own lived experiences using their own authentic voices and to reveal their recollections of their schooling experiences with emphasis on their perceptions of the “inequities” cited in published literature. More importantly, the prompt was created for participants to describe how these “inequities” built their character and resiliency. As a qualitative study, the authors examined the effects of urban social contexts, events, objects, and ideas in their successes and failures.

### ***Data Collection and Data Analysis***

All the narratives were read by the two researchers focusing on the

participants' personal reflections of their elementary school, secondary school, and college experiences. Participants narrated their own individual stories and revealed their personal interpretations of their lived experiences and view of classrooms and schools as "socially situated spaces" (Hawkins, 2004). We analyzed each "educational narrative" and chronicled the social background, social climate of the school, and path from elementary towards higher education. These personal testimonies provided rich lessons, insights, and implications for school teachers and administrators. The narratives reflected common problems confronted by students in urban schools and documented how the constraints of social class, racial tensions, gender socialization, and immigrant or generational differences may directly and indirectly shape their academic achievements.

### ***Description and Analysis of Findings from Students' Stories***

The students' detailed essays were read, synthesized, and analyzed carefully for social themes reflected in their life experiences. Many forms of social inequities were identified and sorted into categories. The narratives provided rich sources and descriptions of "inequities" that they have faced in urban schools. Because these inequities are common terms and occurrences, the researchers were able to almost literally identify them in the narratives as the terms were explicitly and at times, implicitly mentioned by the participants themselves. It is significant to point out here that the researchers of the current study carefully read all the narratives together and always reached a consensus in identifying and categorizing the inequities expressed in the students' narratives. Table 1 lists the social inequities students mentioned in their narratives. The main categories were racial prejudice, religious prejudice, gender prejudice, class differences, and culture and language prejudice. The other issues mentioned that did not fit the categories identified in the participants' narratives were drug and alcohol use, generational differences, and gang participation. Having these perceived social inequities reflected in the participants' narratives is an indication of how serious and important it is for school leaders to listen to the authentic voices of urban students.

From this collection of thirty-five (35) narratives, six (6) representative narratives were selected. The six narratives were selected on the basis of their appropriateness, clarity, and relevance in revealing their perceptions of social inequities in schools. The researchers established consensus in selecting the six narratives that provide a variety of social experiences, perceived social inequities, student suggestions through their own words, and lessons learned. The basic set of criteria used by the

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Table 1. Overall Social Inequities Perceived by Students in Urban Schools.

Racial Prejudice <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• interracial differences</li><li>• racial segregation</li><li>• racial violence</li><li>• stereotyping</li><li>• bullying</li></ul>
Religious Prejudice <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• religious intolerance</li><li>• stereotyping</li></ul>
Gender Prejudice <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• gender segregation</li><li>• unfair treatment</li><li>• stereotyping</li></ul>
Class Differences <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• low income</li><li>• stereotyping</li><li>• double standard- male/female</li></ul>
Culture and Language Prejudice <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• language barrier</li><li>• language accent</li><li>• stereotyping</li><li>• different traditions, family orientations</li><li>• cultural clash</li></ul>
Other Inequities <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• drug and alcohol use</li><li>• generational differences</li><li>• gang participation</li></ul>

researchers in selecting the six narratives were variety of issues, student suggestions, and lessons learned. Duplication of issues, suggestions, and lessons learned were carefully avoided. The selected six students were all first in their families to attend college. The essays reflect the authentic voices of the participants and highlight the students' "perceived social inequities," "words of wisdom," and "lessons learned" in their school experiences. All names in the narratives have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.



Presentation and Analysis of Findings from 6 Selected Case Studies

**(1) Pascual—Navigating Through the System  
with Determination and Support**

Pascual M. was born in Ecuador but educated in the United States. He is first in the family to attend college and has high hopes of becoming a famous anthropologist. His mother raised him as a single parent and worked hard to provide him with the basic necessities of life and was a strict disciplinarian.

*Perceived Social Inequities.* He came to the U.S. speaking only Spanish. In his narrative, he notes “in those days they didn’t have teacher’s assistants to help the Latino children that spoke Spanish.” He had to stumble through school until he gained fluency with English. Pascual acknowledged that he admired a teacher named Mrs. R., for she instilled him with confidence and inspired him to excel. “She was a Latina and she would tell my mother that I was smart and I would be a professional in the world, some day.” Pascual also enjoyed the support of a Latina counselor, named Mrs. L. She helped guide his curriculum, gave him advice about college and more importantly, “she cared about how I was doing in school.” The personal attention, guidance and support he received from this teacher and counselor helped build his confidence, self-esteem and ensure his steady academic advancement.

Although Pascual was fluent and took pride in speaking Spanish, “[he] soon learned that it was preferable to speak English and the use of Spanish was not really appreciated.” He keenly observed, “that all the Latino kids would speak English to look good and relate to the ‘white kids’ because we all wanted to be like the ‘white kids’ because they had all the nice materials.” He depicted the racial climate of the school as tense. It included the presence of various social groupings such as gang members, skaters, white power, gothic, ravers, rebles (boys and girls that wear 605 jeans, tight clothes and leather boots), ballers, (those who wore expensive brand name clothes like Guess, Nautica, etc), and the *chuntis*, (*Nortenos*—those who recently came from Mexico dressing like cowboys). Pascual never joined any of them but instead played sports and joined the salsa club. In the eleventh grade, he described how some members of the white power group spray-painted ethnic slurs on the school walls. They threatened to bomb the school on a certain day but, fortunately, it never happened.

*Pascual’s Words of Wisdom and Lessons.* Pascual stressed the need to “define and expand ourselves, for example learn more about people, places and events. Also, we have to confront our own racism and biases, honestly acknowledge these biases and begin to question them, and

not hide racism but openly discuss it as it appears in our lives.” Pascual exemplified the strong determination to advance academically because, as he emphasized, he “wanted it badly.” He underscored motivation as a key component to success. His mother also assisted by pushing him to excel. She provided him with the confidence and security to strive to do his best echoing the “culture of possibility” that Patricia Gandara mentioned in her study of educational mobility (1995). However, it is through his association with what Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (2001) described as “institutional agents”—teachers, counselors, coaches, and mentors—that enable Pascual to successfully navigate through the educational system.

**(2) *Elsa J.—Affirming the Importance of Culture, Language and Ethnic Pride***

Elsa J. was born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, where she attended the local public schools. After a few years living in south central Los Angeles, her family moved out of the “barrio” into a more middle class community known as Pico Rivera. This transition caused her to undergo a dramatic revelation concerning her culture, language, and ethnic identity. She wrote:

One thing that I will always remember about *{el barrio}* ...is how it inspired me to become proud of who I am and where I came from... My father always told my brother and me...never to be embarrassed of *nuestra cultura*,... we were not allowed to speak English at home unless it was necessary... As a young child, ...I resented him because I wanted to speak English: after all, I was an “American.”

*Perceived Social Inequities.* In her narrative, Elsa revealed how she enjoyed her kindergarten teacher Ms. B. because “she made us feel welcomed and was patient with us.” The kindness exhibited by Ms. B., stood in stark contrast to the mean-spirited behavior of Ms. G., her fourth grade teacher. Ms. G. “made my life miserable and ruined the little confidence I had as a child.” Since, Elsa’s first language is Spanish, Ms. G. ridiculed her by saying “Can’t you read, are you stupid? I remember praying to God for her not to pick me because I did not want her to make fun of me or call me names in front of the classroom.”

Soon thereafter, Elsa lost the desire to learn and her school grades dropped dramatically. Her parents noticed her negative attitude towards school and transferred her into another classroom where she cheerfully asserted, “My teacher did not mentally abuse me.” Elsa claimed that the negative learning experience left her mentally and emotionally scared and is one of the reasons why she is still not “able to speak in front of a group of people.”

*Elsa's Words of Wisdom and Lessons.* At this important juncture in her education, Elsa's father directly intervened. He emphasized the need to preserve the Mexican language and culture in order to instill her with a sense of pride and self-esteem. He adopted strict rules—demanding that Spanish be the language of the home and the means of communication among the family and insisted that English be reserved for only those individuals unable to speak Spanish. Although Elsa and her siblings resented this imposition of Spanish, it forced them to practice their native language.

Elsa eventually realized that cultural assimilation was not the answer to her problems. She admitted that, "I was denying my culture and it was foolish of me not to want to speak Spanish if it was part of my identity." Moreover, she was ashamed and embarrassed by the resentment and discrimination perpetuated by her Chicana/o classmates. They ridiculed and insulted recent Mexican immigrants (whom they referred to as "wetbacks") struggling to learn English. These Chicana/os, Elsa noted, "had *el nopal en la frente* (the map of Mexico imprinted on their face)" yet hypocritically refused to speak Spanish. These racial attitudes inspired her to gain a renewed sense of ethnic pride and to declare, "Afterwards, I promised myself that I would speak Spanish and continue my Mexican traditions and would not deny *mi gente*."

Elsa's great cultural awakening inspired her to enroll in Chicana/o Studies classes at the university and bolstered her academic capability and diffused the hurt and shame caused by Mrs. G.'s negative comments during her early years of elementary school. Instead of giving up hope she advises that we unite and advocate for change. She wrote:

I just hope that no other children have to experience the humiliations that I faced in Ms. G.'s classroom. But, in order to stop these types of things from happening, we as a society and as parents have to come together and change some of the bad things in our school system. We need to unite and be our children's voices.

### ***(3) Jonathan—Fighting Racial Segregation and Appropriating His Own Ethnic Identity***

Jonathan H. began his education in an inner city school district in Long Beach. At the age of six, Jonathan's father was shot in the head and died. This tragic event caused his family to be "thrown into a whirlwind of confusion and instability." His immigrant mother immediately abandoned the U.S. and decided to take her children back to her homeland of Trinidad and Tobago. His family eventually returned to the United States, where Jonathan was bussed to a middle class school and tracked into a low reading group. He quickly noticed his ability group was often

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neglected and excluded from the simple privileges offered to the high ability group. He explained that he learned nothing when he attended his neighborhood elementary school situated in a majority “black” area. He claimed that the teacher allowed the children to simply “play around in the class.” This lack of motivation caused Jonathan to feel “confused, bad and hopeless.”

*Perceived Social Inequities.* To improve the quality of his education, Jonathan’s mother enrolled him in a magnet school located in a very affluent, “White” neighborhood. Jonathan explained that “despite the huge busing effort for inner city students we were still clandestinely segregated from our White counterparts. Even lunch was indirectly segregated.” The privileges of White students that he observed caused Jonathan to desire to be “just like the White kids” and he explains:

I remember going through a stage where I listened to rock music, begged my mom for a paper bag lunch and Ocean Pacific (surfer clothes). I wanted to ski, have blond straight hair, and a skateboard. I wanted to be just like the White kids. Although I wanted to, I was never good enough to hang out with the White kids. Throughout Junior High most of my friends were Chicana/os/Latina/os or Cambodian. I was totally disconnect from other Black people.

This type of cultural denial and self-hate was perpetuated throughout his middle and high school years. Regardless, of his teachers’ high expectations, Jonathan was unable to focus his attention on his studies due to the emotional distress he was under. He began to act out, became disobedient, got into fights, and the administration responded by imposing various types of disciplinary action. Jonathan noted that most of the “affluent” and predominantly “White” schools he attended, shared similar patterns of racial segregation but, exhibited different degrees of pervasiveness as he explains:

Even the football team was segregated when we divided into our social groups. There was a small mixed group of players that I socialized with. The others socialized with their respective racial groups... At Mountain Spring there was always racial tension. Black and Latino gangs were fighting for turf and Whites were generally disgruntled because of the inner city problems minorities brought with them.

*Jonathan’s Words of Wisdom and Lessons.* After graduating from high school, Jonathan enrolled in a few courses at a local community college. However, he soon discovered he lacked the organization and necessary “critical thinking skills” to advance his education. He admitted, “I failed all my classes that year and dropped out.” In reflecting upon his public school difficulties, Jonathan holds the school responsible for he was “encouraged to

excel in sports while I remained a mediocre student.” He asserted that “college prep courses did nothing, but prepare me for failure.” His parents could not help him because “they were either busy or did not know how to do the work themselves” and his teachers “did not care about what the students learned.”

Jonathan blamed his and his friends’ shattered dreams and missed opportunities on the lack of institutional support and deficient methods of teaching prevalent throughout the public school system. He elaborated upon the inequities of the system and explains that:

We were molded to take our place at the...bottom of the pyramid...[and] we are being prepared to work in service, trade, and low-level management positions. I am still trying to heave the stagnating public school doctrine (Eurocentric cultural model) and replace it with a critical and multicultural paradigm.

Jonathan lamented the lack of ethnic role models and recalls that “most of the professional staff in the schools I attended were female and White.” The lack of critical inquiry apparent in his courses also frustrated him. He decried “the curriculum given to us left me with a sense that nothing was wrong with the world and all problems were solved. I did not realize that there were dissenting views to what we were learning.”

For many years Jonathan denied his own heritage and desired to be “just like the White kids” but knew he would never be “good enough” to be fully accepted by them. He wrote: “I wanted to ski, have blond straight hair, and a skateboard. I wanted to be just like the White kids.” This “White privilege” instilled him with self-hatred that caused him to remain distant from other African Americans. Although Jonathan has graduated from the University and maintains a diverse circle of friends, he has not yet fully come to terms with some of the past inequities and the painful experiences he endured. Jonathan’s narrative illuminates his struggle against racial segregation and the cultural alienation that students of color experience within the Eurocentric culture in most urban schools.

***(4) Michael H.—Political Activism  
as a Viable Alternative to Poverty and Crime***

Michael H. is an Anglo American who depicts his early educational experience as “chaotic,” causing him to move over 30 times. Sometimes he moved down the block; other times all the way across town. His family’s life was not the most wholesome. His father served time in jail for several drinking and driving citations while his mother spent most of

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her time working to support the family, leaving Michael and his brother unsupervised. As Michael explained, “We were always doing something that might be construed as illegal.” At first, they did simple things like breaking into school lockers, but soon began to break into local schools, houses, and cars. This landed his brother into prison where he spent most of his high school years and early twenties. His brother’s membership in a deadly urban gang, however, earned Michael the respect and protection he needed at school and on the streets.

*Perceived Social Inequities.* During his elementary education, Michael enrolled in six different schools. This made it difficult for him to understand the subject matter or the goals of instruction. He was never a good student not earning more than a “D+” average and considered himself lucky to have graduated from high school. His single mom’s long hours at work forced him to raise himself. He played with the other poor and ethnically mixed kids living in the same small modest apartments. In class he rarely paid attention and was often placed in detention. Rather than do his assigned homework, he played outdoors until his parent returned home from a hard day of work.

During middle school he lived in Whittier and La Habra, or what he claims the locals referred to as “Guada La Habra” due to the large number of Latina/o recent immigrants residing in this area. Michael describes this as a time and place where he simply “didn’t like anybody.” Despite this level of social discomfort, Michael distinctly recalled how rich kids were bussed in from affluent neighborhoods in an attempt to integrate Whittier schools. He noted how different these kids were from the rest of them and that “they associated only with themselves. If you were lucky enough to associate with them, you could not have friends from you own [local] neighborhood.”

Michael did manage to establish friendships among some of these elite White students. In order to spend more time hanging out at the homes of these rich kids, he soon started skipping classes. His lack of economic prosperity, however, made the wealthy White parents apprehensive and they eventually prohibited him from interacting with their children.

Upon graduation from high school, Michael claimed he “had no future” and depicted himself as “alone and hopeless” without the support of his peer group. Confused and alienated he began experimenting with drugs. His family situation had become even more chaotic and offered him little support. Michael explains how his brother had become “more psychotic after being shot by a rival gang.” Michael’s mother kicked him out of her house, forcing him to move-in with his step-father who had since become addicted to heroin. Living in this environment, Michael also began to get “hassled by the cops” and started to pursue the same

illicit lifestyle adapted by his brother and father. At this critical juncture in his life, an affluent high school friend convinced Michael to enroll in at least one course at the local community college. He wrote that:

...I was addicted to an ideal, a vision about how the world should be. I began to understand a critically important concept: Education is the key to liberation. I understood that the only way I could improve my conditions was through education. The more I know, the less helpless I am about my surroundings.”

*Michael's Words of Wisdom and Lessons.* Michael continued to enroll in political science courses and became absorbed in political ideas. He was able to regain control of his life and pursued a career that provided him a clear sense of purpose and commitment to social change. When asked how and what he might change about the present educational system, Michael insisted that the first and most basic step was to introduce racial/ethnic diversity in history courses and textbooks throughout the curriculum. He believed schools should pay more attention to the contributions and legacy of people of color, women and poor people because “for too long these communities have been stepped on and given a forced hopelessness...” He shared his own critical reflections concerning the organization of schooling:

...if children are categorized, labeled, and divided, it automatically places a value on those children and ultimately their future. Many children, like myself, come to the educational system bruised and battered, if we provide these children with an educational system that does not provide any knowledge and any real potential future for them. Then they are lost...Ultimately, I would like to see this whole system reworked so that children wouldn't have to go through this maze of privileged/non-privileged, so that their future wouldn't be based on the gender, race, or class background.

Michael's intellectual development embodied Freire's notion of conscientization. His acquisition of knowledge led to a higher level of self-awareness and inspired him to implement political action. His upbringing reflected some of what Stanton-Salazar (2001) depicted as a mixture of “hope and despair.” His race afforded him a certain amount of privilege and membership within the dominant culture, yet his working class background placed definite limitations on his opportunities for success and happiness. Although he initially rejected schooling, he eventually learned how to embrace education as a source of knowledge, power, and liberation.

**(5) Tamara J.—Motherhood Provides Her an Inspiration to Learn**

Tamara J. is a tall and lean African American woman who in her younger days was “very athletic, participating in sprints, relays and marathons as well as the long and high jump.” She was born in Indiana where she spent most of her early elementary school years. She attended a local public elementary school where, except for one Indian girl, all the students who attended were Black. She wrote that “all of us children were in awe because we’d never seen a real live Indian person before. Everything that we’d heard or seen of Indians was in textbooks and in their native regalia. When White students were bused into her neighborhood school, Tamara was shocked because “for the first time White people attended our school.”

*Perceived Social Inequities.* Tamara eventually moved from Indiana to South Central Los Angeles and attended a large racially mixed urban public school with over 2,000 students. She depicted the racial composition as mostly Blacks and Latinos with a sprinkling of Whites and Asians. She explained, “It was here that I experienced my first social interactions with Hispanics. In fact, I had never even seen a Hispanic until I moved to California and I literally had to ask someone one day where he was from.” She began to experience racial tensions on a daily basis. She became familiar with students “who defiantly identified themselves as gang members, and where the socioeconomic background of the residents range from poverty level, working class and the very low end of the middle class.”

When Tamara became pregnant as a teenager, she described it as a “bitter-sweet time of my life because while I was doing things that I enjoyed, I had to give up basketball because I became pregnant. I am happy that I did not have to drop out of school as so many others have because the father and I had a very supportive family.” Instead, she enrolled in an academically demanding magnet high school where she met a teacher who advised her not only about academics but also about how to advance in life as a young mother with high aspirations.

*Tamara’s Words of Wisdom and Lessons.* After graduation, Tamara decided to attend a Los Angeles community college. One of the major obstacles she encountered was the lack of institutional support and any meaningful academic advice. She noted that “none of the counselors did any counseling in your favor . . . there I learned I had to want success for myself, not depend on everyone else expecting it or wanting it for me, if success for me was truly going to happen.” This commitment reflects what Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (2001) has conceptualized as “unsponsored self-reliance.” Tamara not only graduated from the community college



but also earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees from a university. She explained how adversity helped shape her character:

I truly appreciate each and every one of my academic moments of exposure because those moments helped to shape the person I am today. Although parents are our first teachers, school is where we spend the majority of our waking hours. School is where my skills of discipline, compassion, time management, goal setting, socialization, and acceptance of differences and similarities were enhanced, developed and fine-tuned.

**(6) *Parla K.—Struggling to Balance Cultural Traditions and Gender Equality***

Parla K. was born and raised in California, but her parents fought diligently to preserve their Indian culture. They required their children to dress in Indian clothes, demanded that they speak their native language at home, and forced them to give priority to the needs and desires of their family and minimized the importance of their friends. Parla underscored this cultural conflict, "I am Indian through my blood and American through my upbringing." However, her parents resented America for its broken promises of economic prosperity and the social inequality that they experienced. They had to work the land and pick fruit in the burning sun for low wages in order to support their family. She explained the sense of rejection experienced by her parents:

America wasn't too friendly to them because they didn't look like other Americans, they didn't dress like them, they didn't speak the same language as Americans, and they didn't know the lifestyles or mannerisms of Americans.

*Perceived Social Inequities.* Parla explained that adjustment to school was difficult. She wrote:

All of the girls in my class, who were mostly White, always wore pretty dresses, different hairstyles, new sandals and even nail polish. I was never allowed to do that. Because I didn't look like the rest of the girls in my class, I had a hard time making friends throughout grade school.

To make matter worse her parents instilled a double standard—one for males and another for females. They allowed her older brother to enjoy all the freedom and independence he desired because, after all, he was "a man":

Culturally, Indian parents have always praised boys so much more than girls and have these set gender inequalities that it's extremely disgusting to even think about it. So knowing that my brother had all

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the freedom he wanted in high school, and I none, created a resentment in me towards the Indian culture and my parents.

In addition, Parla's parents expected her to return to India and marry a person they had selected. This glaring gender inequity caused a high level of mental and emotional stress for Parla. Ultimately, she decided to gain more control over her life and demonstrate to her parents that she wasn't losing her "Indian-ness" by adding some "American-ness" into her way of life.

Parla refused to accept this traditional role of women. She moved away from her family to attend a university where she joined several campus organizations, including an Indian club and a Greek sorority. These clubs instilled her with a stronger sense of identity and the opportunity to reconcile both her Indian culture and American upbringing. Rather than the constant clash of cultures that fueled her disdain for Indian traditions, she gained a renewed sense of ethnic pride and cultural appreciation for her ethnic heritage. "I am finally proud to claim my Indian heritage and at the same time know the American culture."

*Parla's Words of Wisdom and Lessons.* Parla acknowledged that, "I was just as solid in my ways as my parents were in theirs." However, time and distance enabled her to critically reflect upon her cultural heritage and provided her with a different orientation.

Parla's struggle to defend her own voice and independence in life made her a stronger person. She gained an appreciation for what it means to be a multicultural person. She plans to become a teacher and share her understanding of cultural diversity with other students of color who may face language barriers, cultural miscommunication, gender bias, or generational gaps. It is time as Parla stated, "to teach students the truth."

Realistically, our world is so diverse and to limit it to only one culture is providing my generation and the upcoming generations a false reality and an education that is meaningless. I want students like me, first or second generation, to know that they're not alone in this fight, and if we all work together we can preserve the heritage of their family as well as learn the culture of American (whatever it might be)... I want to teach students...the truth, that we are really a heterogeneous society, and it's their cultural backgrounds that make us all a unique mix.

It is this "unique mix" of cultural backgrounds that schools need to incorporate into their course curriculum. After all, as Parla so clearly demonstrated, we are living in a more diverse world that requires a new vision and approach towards living and learning. Table 2 provides the summary of findings related to perceived inequities and lessons learned from students' urban school experiences. It also includes some selected

Table 2. Perceived Inequities and Lessons Learned from Six Representative Urban Students.

Students	Perceived Inequities	Quotes of Wisdom	Lessons Learned
Pascual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Spanish language bias</li> <li>◆ Lack of instructional help in Spanish</li> <li>◆ Racial prejudice</li> <li>◆ Violence at school</li> <li>◆ Poverty</li> </ul>	<p>“Confront our own racism”</p> <p>“She was a Latina and she would tell my mother that I was smart and I would be a professional in the world, someday.”</p>	<p>Question and discuss our biases. Seek help by using institutional agents—teachers, counselors, and coaches.</p>
Elsa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Spanish language bias</li> <li>◆ Low teacher expectation</li> <li>◆ Humiliation from teacher</li> <li>◆ Poverty</li> </ul>	<p>“We need to unite and be our children’s voices.”</p> <p>“Afterwards, promised myself that I would speak Spanish and continue my Mexican traditions and would not deny <i>mi gente</i>.”</p>	<p>Speak out against injustices. Through parental influence, use of Spanish at home strengthens self-concept and identity.</p>
Jonathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Father was victim of violence</li> <li>◆ Tracking low ability students</li> <li>◆ Low teacher expectation</li> <li>◆ Racial segregation</li> <li>◆ Racial violence/tension</li> <li>◆ Disconnection from his Black identity</li> <li>◆ Poverty</li> </ul>	<p>“Replace the educational system with a critical and multicultural paradigm.”</p> <p>“I wanted to ski, have blond straight hair, and a skateboard. I wanted to be just like the White kids.”</p>	<p>Build self concept to avoid self-hatred and disconnection from one’s cultural heritage. Honoring differences—not being White—building ties across cultures and learning levels.</p>
Michael	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Family disconnection</li> <li>◆ Low teacher expectations</li> <li>◆ Lack of parental support</li> <li>◆ Racial segregation and bias</li> <li>◆ Drugs</li> <li>◆ Gang affiliation</li> <li>◆ Poverty</li> </ul>	<p>“Education is the key to liberation.”</p> <p>“Ultimately, I would like to see the whole system reworked so that children wouldn’t have to go through this maze of privileged/non privileged.”</p>	<p>Infuse diversity and ethnic content into history and other courses. Treat all children equally.</p>

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Table 2. Perceived Inequities and Lessons Learned from Six Representative Urban Students. (Continued)

Students	Perceived Inequities	Quotes of Wisdom	Lessons Learned
Tamara	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Racial Segregation</li> <li>◆ Racial violence and tension</li> <li>◆ Teenage pregnancy</li> <li>◆ Poverty</li> </ul>	<p>“I truly appreciate each and every one of my academic moments of exposure because those moments helped to shape the person I am today.”</p> <p>“I learned I had to want success for myself, not depend on everyone else expecting it or wanting it for me, if success for me was truly going to happen.”</p>	<p>Adversity builds strength.</p> <p>Self-reliance to achieve success.</p>
Parla	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Gender bias</li> <li>◆ Racial bias</li> <li>◆ Cultural conflict</li> </ul>	<p>“I am finally proud to claim my Indian heritage and at the same time know the American culture.”</p> <p>“I want to teach students... the truth, that we are really a heterogeneous society.”</p>	<p>Appreciation for being a multicultural person.</p> <p>Balancing cultural traditions and gender equality.</p>

quotes or “words of wisdom” expressed by the six representative urban students. While broad arrays of themes were identified in the 35 narratives, the selected six (6) narratives represented an interesting contrast and variety in terms of the social inequities, students’ words of wisdom, and lessons learned.

In Table 2, for example, Pascual M. underscored the importance of nurturing robust support networks and establishing close and caring relationships with teachers, counselors, and coaches. Elsa J.’s narrative depicted the tremendous influence of language, culture and ethnic identity in the learning process as well as nurturing strong self-esteem. Jonathan H. openly and candidly discussed the impact of racism and discrimination and advocates the need to create a more diverse, inclusive, and hospitable learning environment where all students’ knowledge and lived experiences are equally accepted. Michael Henderson vividly

described the impact of class background and how economic scarcity coupled with negative familial influences can encourage students to engage in gangs, drugs, and crime. However, his political activism and positive peer influence inspired him to redirect his life towards education. Tamara J. became an African American teen mom but rather than succumb to defeat and drop-out of school, she utilized this situation as a “wake up call” that inspired her to learn and excel. Parla K. struggled not only to balance her Indian heritage and her American upbringing but also to fight for gender equality and her right as an Indian woman to secure a college education.

### Implications for Teaching and Leading for Educational Justice

There were several important lessons gained from the personal struggles and educational journeys reflected in student narratives that were examined using the social justice lenses: the role of funds of knowledge, resiliency, connectedness and caring, social networking, critical pedagogy, and inquiry as stance. The use of these lenses in understanding and examining the students’ narratives made the current study unique. Rather than negate their social background and diverse lived experiences, they learned to embrace them as powerful “*funds of knowledge*” that helped direct them through the trials and tribulations they were forced to endure. They exhibited a high sense of *resiliency* due to the sources of support provided by their culture, family peers and ethnic community. The *social networks* and strong connections they nurtured with their teachers, counselors and fellow students shielded them from violence and crime often prevalent within their ethnic communities. Utilizing *inquiry as a stance*, the participants were able to reflect and re-examine their past educational histories and identify patterns of social inequities. Using the viewpoint of *critical pedagogy*, the researchers and the participants were able to understand the social, political, and cultural contexts that influence their personal development.

What the participants in the study shared were the valuable lessons they have acquired through years of struggle and their narratives can help pave the path toward social and educational justice for others to follow. Their authentic voices offered implications for implementing a social and educational justice perspective in the classroom and in leading schools through open conversation, articulation of the richness of diversity, use of inequities as topics for social and multicultural awareness, emphasis on positive behavior and caring connection, and use of critical literacy. Based on the findings of this study we offer the following recommendations:

- (1) *Provide opportunities for students to discuss their experiences with*

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*social inequities including racism and discrimination they perceive in school.* The narratives brought the experiences and emotions of the urban students to life by portraying their neighborhoods, home life, various types of parental support or involvement, their social groups, and their participation within school-sponsored activities. Through these essays, the students projected not only their frustrations but also their triumphs and proudly acknowledged those teachers, counselors, or mentors who made a difference in their lives. Students shared the challenges they confronted alongside the coping strategies they devised to help ensure their academic progress. Although most underscored the need to change the educational system, they did not know how to initiate institutional reforms. Therefore, students need to have opportunities to speak openly about their own experiences with the variety of inequities that they perceive in schools. One of the ways for students to have the opportunity to voice their opinions is through teacher-driven classroom instructional strategies. The teacher can use the perceived social inequities as topics such as racial prejudice and gender prejudice or class differences, for example, for thematic language arts and social studies units. Whether it is done as a whole class activity or individual activity, reading fiction and non-fiction books with carefully chosen social justice themes could stimulate thinking and conversation about these topics.

*(2) Students also need to become aware of the different ways in which racism interacts with other forms of inequities based on class, gender, language, and religious differences that can impede their self-esteem and academic achievement.* They can be made aware of these issues through district-wide diversity programs for teachers, staff, and students, as well as through carefully planned classroom reading, writing, and oral language development activities by the teacher. A book *Stirring Up Justice: Writing and Reading to Change the World* written by Jessica Singer, for example, has many suggestions for teachers on how to create learning environments that honor diversity and encourage social justice activism. Unfortunately, the standards-based teaching practices in many states including California are lacking in “stirring up justice” curriculum and instruction.

*(3) Articulate with the students the richness of the diversity they bring in the classroom.* By expressing their “voices of pain and voices of hope” (Rabow, 2004) through writing, we provide the opportunity for students to break their “silence” and to construct their own interpretations of knowledge, grapple with issues of power, and establish their ethnic identities. These narratives demonstrated how students directly experience the pain of racism, the abuse of sexism, and other forms of inequities that

are woven throughout social institutions and embedded within their own individual consciousness. However, the narratives also revealed that students have lived experiences of diverse social networks in the community and their family households never function in isolation. It is important that school leaders including teachers and administrators acknowledge the rich cultural backgrounds and practices and how to use the various “funds of knowledge” to urban students’ advantage.

(4) *Use the perceived social inequities as topics for social and multicultural awareness.* While the narratives imply that adversity can build strength, they also suggest that teachers need to understand this challenge in order to provide students the assistance and resources that can help them advance in their schooling. The critical social issues and inequities could serve as dialogue topics for reflective discussion to raise the students’ levels of sociopolitical consciousness as well as their personal, community, and global awareness for potential transformation and social action (Banks, 2002; 1996; L alas, 1991). School leaders including preservice and inservice teachers need to acknowledge the value of multiculturalism and its influence in developing the students’ positive attitudes toward different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. Awareness of one’s cultural identity and the positive influence funds of knowledge have on urban students develop the students’ confidence in their ability to succeed academically and socially.

(5) *Use critical literacy in expanding students’ responses.* Critical thinking in education means that the critical person has the capacity and desire to seek reasons, truth, and evidence. To be critical basically means to be more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, and ambiguous or obscure concepts. In the language of critical pedagogy, the critical person is one who is empowered to seek justice and emancipation from oppressive conditions. Critical literacy is a powerful approach in working with all students, including urban students and second language learners, because of the prime importance it gives to social engagement, authenticity, respect for diversity in worldviews, and reflection. School leaders including administrators and preservice and inservice teachers need to learn the perspective of viewing critical literacy as a natural part of learning and use teaching strategies that foster critical literacy such as juxtapositioning, theme-based focus groups, problem-posing, and creating alternative texts across content areas (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

## Conclusion

The dominant themes expressed in the students' educational narratives demonstrate the historical, social, political, economic, and cultural contexts that influence their personal development and schooling experiences. Racial violence, stereotyping, bullying, racial segregation, poverty, language barrier, gang participation, and drug and alcohol use are specific common examples of social inequities that the participants in the study discussed. This means that school leaders and teachers must exert concerted efforts to study the historical, social, political, economic, and cultural conditions that pave the way for the existence of inequities and "savagely inequalities" in many urban schools.

The student narratives also suggest that the school culture and learning environments are not conducive for the education of ethnic minorities, especially the English language learners (ELL). Rumberger and Gandara (2004), for example, explained that the "seven inequitable conditions" that exist in California affecting the opportunities of the ELL to learn include inequitable access to trained teachers, inadequate professional development for teachers, inequitable access to appropriate assessment, inadequate instructional time, inequitable access to instructional materials, inequitable access to adequate facilities, and intense segregation in schools and classrooms. These inequitable conditions and perceived social inequities by the students in the study must serve as "red flags" for school administrators to enhance their understanding of inner-city school contexts and to lead for social and educational justice.

Leading for educational and social justice, according to Cochran-Smith (2004), may include culturally responsive teaching, making content comprehensible and accessible, effective and purposeful questioning, use of different forms of assessment to inform instruction, support for students, collaboration with parents, community members, and other professionals, knowing how to interpret data, maintaining high academic standards, being a teacher-researcher, and strong advocacy for equity and democracy.

Aside from democratic citizenship and a focus on democracy, others suggest that teaching and leading for social justice also includes "anti-oppression education" which highlights diversity in schools and proposes different ways of confronting the inequities faced by students in urban multicultural environments (Brandes & Kelly, 2004). Many classroom practitioners have also begun designing and implementing instruction that reflects social justice instruction and critical teaching through students' personal stories, use of literature, critical literacy as comprehension (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), "acting for justice" les-



sons (Christensen, 2001), thematic units (Beale, 2004), service learning (Lucas, 2005), cooperative learning (Sapon-Shevin, 2004), and other learning strategies across differences (Shor & Pari, 1999).

In conclusion, programs developing school leaders should emphasize an advocacy for social and educational justice for all students, positive behavior, and effective learning through careful attention to the needs of its urban students. Respecting the diversity of student voices in the classroom should be a high priority for school leaders including administrators and pre-service and in-service teachers. Educational leadership, educational foundation, and teaching methods courses as well as staff development workshops for administrators and teachers should integrate diversity and how to make caring connections with diverse urban students as topics for discussion and implementation. The social justice lenses consist of critical pedagogy, funds of knowledge, resiliency, politics of caring and connectedness, social networking, and critical inquiry as stance provide school leaders with a conceptual framework and “skill-set” for enhancing their self-awareness, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions regarding the schooling of diverse students in urban schools. The urban students’ “voices of pain and voices of hope” need to be heard in order for school leaders to understand the students and create a caring environment to pave the path for academic excellence and educational justice in schools.

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