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**Presenting *Precious Knowledge*: Using Film to Model Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Youth Civic Activism for Social Studies Teachers**

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I examine the potential for developing preservice social studies teachers' understanding of transformational resistance, Latin@ civil rights movements, and culturally sustaining pedagogy through a project using the film *Precious Knowledge*. This documentary depicts high school students in a Mexican American Studies (MAS) program using civil disobedience to protest Arizona's ban of the program. The teachers prepared for the screening by reading and responding to scholarly articles on Latin@ school engagement and Chican@ student activism. After viewing the film and engaging in small group and whole class discussions, participants reported that they learned about current and past Chican@ student movements and gained an appreciation for the transformational potential of civic activism. The project serves as an example of how methods instructors could use school documentaries or other films as pedagogical tools, and more specifically it suggests readings and instructional activities to pair with such films.

As an instructor for a secondary social studies methods course, I find that many preservice teachers are passionate about creating lesson plans that promote social justice, justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a) and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). However, once they begin student teaching, they often revert to a vision of social studies more

focused on the transmission of history (Stanley, 2005), something most had experienced as high school students themselves. They also report feeling constrained by standards and curricula that underrepresent the histories of certain populations and limit opportunities for critical analysis of oppression. The documentary *Precious Knowledge* (2011) offers a model of critical, social justice-oriented pedagogy (Hackman, 2005) that deepens teachers' understanding not only of transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), but also of the historical and current struggles of many of their Latin@<sup>1</sup> students.

*Precious Knowledge* follows the stories of the students, teachers, and parents at Tucson High School as they protest Arizona House Bill 2281, which would ban their Mexican American Studies (MAS) program. The directors, Ari Luis Palos and Eren Isabel McGinnis of Dos Vatos Productions, spent the entire 2008-2009 school year filming classes and interviewing students, teachers, and policymakers. Among the protagonists' many arguments for keeping the program is the 93% graduation rate of MAS students, as compared to the 48% graduation rate of Mexican American students nationwide. Scenes of the MAS classes exemplify culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice education for preservice teachers, who may never have been exposed to such transformative teaching in their own education. The curriculum incorporates indigenous texts, concepts, and epistemology, and the teachers are seen encouraging students to question dominant forms of knowledge. The film is set against the backdrop of anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona which had attracted national media attention. The website for the film contained links to a "Save Ethnic Studies" petition, suggesting that the film itself serves as one form of political activism even as it also documented the activism of the Tucson students and teachers. I chose *Precious Knowledge* as the central film for analysis for two primary reasons: (a) it portrays high

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<sup>1</sup> I use *Latin@* rather than *Latino* or *Latina/o* because it is a more inclusive term than those that conform to the traditional gender binary.

school students engaged in justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a) and the academic and personal transformation they experience as a result, and (b) it exemplifies culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) with the fastest growing demographic in the U.S. and one that is particularly vulnerable to subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies (Wortham, Murillo Jr., & Hamman, 2002).

I argue here for locating this project in the social studies methods course, even if preservice teachers also have a social foundations course requirement. Such foundations courses may expose teachers to concepts such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2005) and subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999). However, for social studies teachers preparing to teach civics and government, their methods course can offer a space for more in-depth exploration of social action as a key element of social justice education (Hackman, 2005). Social studies teachers also may bring more of a historian's perspective to the discussion of social movements, such as the 1960s Chicano student movement. Finally, attending to issues of equity and cultural relevance in all teacher education courses, not just social foundations courses, will communicate the message that these issues should not be considered an add-on or afterthought (Ladson-Billings, 1995), but a constant pedagogical aim.

This project's focus on the Mexican American Studies students as exemplars of civically active youth is important for the following reasons: (a) national pushout rates for Latino youth are almost twice as high as that of the general population (Rong & Preissle, 2009), (b) this is the fastest growing immigrant population in the U.S., (c) preservice teachers, particularly in new arrival states, may be less aware of the struggles of Latino youth than other minoritized groups and thus less prepared for meeting their unique educational needs, for instance in terms of linguistic differences and colonial history, and (d) recent anti-immigrant legislation and policies

signal xenophobic sentiments and racist nativism (Pérez Huber et al., 2008) that may exacerbate educational obstacles for Latin@ students (Wortham et al., 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of the film *Precious Knowledge* as a pedagogical tool for developing preservice teachers' 1) knowledge of historical and current Chican@/Latin@ rights movements, 2) appreciation for the existence and power of transformational resistance in their students, and 3) ability to embody culturally sustaining pedagogy, particularly with Latin@ students. My intent is not to evaluate the use of film for pedagogical purposes in general so much as it is to discuss one specific film's potential for achieving these three goals. My research question is: how can the film *Precious Knowledge* provide preservice teachers with knowledge of Latin@ struggles and resistance, as well as the skills and dispositions to assist their students in engaging in critical, justice-oriented civic participation?

### **Strategies and Gaps in Teacher Education**

There are few, if any, other self-studies examining the use of film to model critical pedagogy or civic activism for pre-service teachers. Therefore, in this section, I will first review literature stressing the need for more research on specific strategies for developing preservice teachers' political awareness, especially with social studies teachers. I will then review studies that have used films for teacher education. I will conclude this section by situating this study in the literature and outlining how it responds to prior scholars' calls for research on teacher education methods.

Journell (2013) found that many preservice social studies teachers have sizeable holes in their awareness and knowledge of political issues. He recommended that teacher educators model political awareness and find creative ways to incorporate discussions of issues in their

classes, particularly in social studies methods courses. He noted that more literature is needed on specific strategies for achieving this goal, and suggested that one such strategy could be “exposure to politically themed media, such as documentaries” (p. 343).

Several educational scholars (e.g., Adams, 2011; Garrett, 2011; Giroux, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Trier 2002, 2003) have espoused the power of film as an educational tool for preservice teachers. Adams (2011) argued that documentary films about education, or what he called “school docs,” can be powerful pedagogical tools for preservice teacher education. He outlined two pedagogical projects that could be used in a social foundations of education course. The first project introduces teachers to Freire’s (1970) notion of the “banking model” of education and provides an opportunity for them to critique educational structures. He recommended four phases for the project: 1) teachers uncover their initial beliefs about pedagogy, 2) they explore chapter two of Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 3) they analyze the school doc, *Resolved*, and 4) they apply Freirean’s concepts of problem-posing pedagogy versus banking to the classroom activities depicted in *Resolved*. He concluded by calling for more research on the effectiveness of school docs in teacher education, asserting that “there is little, if any literature discussing school docs and how they might be taken up pedagogically” (p. 182).

Whereas Adams (2011) proposed pedagogical film projects, Trier (2002) implemented such a project and analyzed students’ written responses. He described his use of *Educating Rita*, *School Ties*, and *Disturbing Behavior* paired with readings by Pierre Bourdieu and Michael Apple to teach habitus and cultural capital. In 2003, Trier reported another project in which he taught techniques of power through pairings of the film *The Paper Chase* with readings by Jennifer Gore and Michel Foucault. Cited in these studies is Giroux (1993), another education

scholar who has recommended the use of film for teacher education, specifically *Dead Poets Society* to teach the politics of identity.

Sealey-Ruiz (2011) described a project using documentary film specifically for the purpose of presenting counternarratives of minoritized students (in this case black males) to challenge typical media representations. She argued that black male students in popular films are often depicted as unruly and dangerous, transformable only through the intervention of an inspiring, and often white, teacher. To counter this perception, she screened the documentary *Beyond the Bricks*, which presents the voices of urban black male students who describe their educational experiences, including encountering low expectations from teachers. Screening attendees who chose to participate in focus groups expressed reactions that ranged from deficit perspectives of black males to resisting the “normalization of failure” (p. 319) and recognizing institutional racism. This study suggests the power of school documentaries to challenge negative stereotypes perpetuated in popular culture and to open up spaces in which teachers can reflect on and disrupt their own deficit perspectives.

I could find only one study of documentary film use specifically in a social studies methods course. H. James Garrett (2011) interviewed six of his methods students about their reactions to the “difficult knowledge” (p. 320) presented in *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. This 2006 Spike Lee documentary on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina forced the teachers to grapple with racism, classism, and the inadequacy of the government’s response to a devastating natural disaster. Garrett used psychoanalytic theory as a framework for understanding participants’ discussions of the film. He argued that because social studies curriculum includes many instances of difficult knowledge, such as slavery, genocide, and wars, greater understanding is needed of the ways teachers think and feel about such traumas.

Although the use of film in teacher education is well documented, I found no studies of social studies methods courses using films to teach culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogy, Latin@ civil rights issues, or youth civic activism. In fact, there are few if any studies of social studies methods courses addressing culturally relevant pedagogy with Latin@ students in any way. This may be explained by deferment of such topics to social foundations instructors; however, as I argued above, the urgency of this component of teacher preparation warrants its inclusion across all courses. I was also unable to find studies that used documentary film to teach justice-oriented citizenship or youth civic activism to pre-service social studies teachers. Given the essential nature of participatory and justice-oriented citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b), we need social studies teachers who have seen the power of youth civic activism and may therefore be likelier to encourage their own students to become politically involved.

This study also builds upon prior research by combining multiple data sources. Whereas Trier (2002; 2003) analyzed his students' reflective essays, Sealy-Ruiz (2011) conducted focus groups, and Garrett (2011) interviewed six students, this study incorporates a pre-film online forum, a post-film focus group, and anonymous post-film written responses. I also provide the assigned reading citations, video URLs, online discussion prompts, and post-viewing questions so that other teacher educators may use or adapt these resources for their own contexts.

This paper presents the results of an effort to use a documentary to strengthen preservice teachers' political awareness, critical consciousness, and appreciation for the power of student civic activism, particularly for minoritized groups. Through drawing their attention to the agency of minoritized students, I invited teachers, as committed intellectuals rather than heroic super-teachers (Fischman & Haas, 2009), to be "committed and oriented by the goals of educational and social justice without succumbing to essentialist notions or easy rhetorical discourses" (p.



572). Cochran-Smith (1995) reminded teacher educators that our goal should not be to present “*the teaching strategies that are most effective for ‘the culturally diverse learner’*” (p. 520), but rather to engage teachers in critical inquiry and the independent pursuit of transformative education for all students. This is in line with Ladson-Billings’ (2006) argument that culturally relevant pedagogy is not a set of strategies but “a way of ‘being’ that will inform ways of ‘doing’” (p. 41). Thus teacher educators should seek methods of developing such ways of being, and one such method may be to use emotionally provocative media such as film.

### **Conceptual Approaches**

My choice of *Precious Knowledge*, design of the project, and interpretations of findings were influenced by Solorzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) concept of transformational resistance, Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004a) definition of justice-oriented citizenship, and Paris’s (2012) notion of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which extends Ladson-Billings’ (1995) model of culturally relevant pedagogy. I integrate the complimentary lenses of transformational resistance and justice-oriented citizenship with culturally sustaining pedagogy because elements of all three are exemplified in the scenes of ethnic studies classes in *Precious Knowledge*. The MAS students are seen developing pride in their cultural heritage as they also address areas of injustice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a) with an explicit critique of oppressive social structures (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). MAS teachers are seen enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy by fostering multilingualism and multiculturalism while also offering access to competence in the dominant culture. In this way they are modeling additive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) by showing authentic caring, building on students’ bicultural experiences, and presenting dominant knowledge not as something to master but as something to challenge.

These pedagogical practices benefit students of all races and ethnicities because they promote reciprocal caring and involve “decentering students’ analytical frame and opening their minds to a broader range of experiences” (Hackman, 2005, p. 106). I drew on all three concepts as I attempted to increase preservice teachers’ awareness of youth transformational resistance, appreciation for justice-oriented citizenship, and ability to teach in culturally sustaining ways. A brief explanation of each theoretical lens follows.

### **Transformational Resistance**

Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) studied race-specific forms of resistance by conducting interviews with participants in the 1968 East Los Angeles school walkouts and the 1993 UCLA student strike for Chicana and Chicano studies. Because this theoretical lens was developed through work with Chican@ activists, it is particularly appropriate for understanding Latin@ student resistance<sup>2</sup>. Before presenting the participants’ counter-narratives, the authors presented a model of categories of oppositional behaviors, which they based on the assertion that resistance requires an aim of social justice. The model identified four distinct types of oppositional behaviors, with the fourth, *transformational resistance*, having the most potential to bring about social change. *Transformational resistance* is distinct from the other three in that qualifying actions must illustrate “both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 319), whereas the other three may lack one or both of these characteristics.

The authors further divided transformational resistance into the two categories of *internal* and *external resistance*, noting that the concepts are fluid and can be exercised at the same time. Internal resistance is subtle and may appear conformist, whereas external resistance is more

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<sup>2</sup> Although *Chican@* refers to people of Mexican ancestry specifically, study of the activism of this group can inform understanding of Latin@ activism more broadly.

overt. For a researcher to identify an action as transformational resistance, whether internal or external, the researcher must have a deep understanding of the context of the behavior and the motivations behind it. The authors also raised an important point that immigrant students “live within layers of subordination based on race, class, gender, language, immigration status, accent, and phenotype,” requiring their resistance to be “examined at an intersection that includes language rights, cultural rights, and the influence of immigration status” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 335).

### **Justice-Oriented Citizenship**

Westheimer and Kahne (2004a; 2004b) identified three different kinds of citizens promoted in various citizenship curricula: personally responsible citizens, participatory citizens, and justice-oriented citizens. They argued that, although it is possible to pursue all three forms of citizenship, the third form offers the greatest potential for students to analyze the root causes of social problems and engage in action to address these problems. Service learning and other common approaches to civics teaching often shy away from politics and prioritize individual behavior over collective efforts. A result of this de-politicization and attempted neutrality is that students do not change their “interest in politics or their perspectives on structural issues” (p. 245). On the other hand, the authors found that students who were presented with a justice-oriented approach to citizenship “reported increased interest in politics and political issues, and were more likely to seek redress of root causes of difficult social ills” (p. 245). The authors contended that the justice-oriented approach best prepares students to actively participate in a democratic society. Because this is the form of citizenship education depicted in *Precious Knowledge*, viewers of the film see its enactment and the transformative effects it has on both the individual students and their community.

## **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

The final conceptual lens framing this study comes from Paris' (2012) essay in which he argued that implementations of Ladson-Billings' (1995) model of culturally relevant pedagogy have not gone far enough in maintaining cultural pluralism. Despite Ladson-Billings' intentions, Paris questioned whether

the research and practice being produced under the umbrella of cultural relevance and responsiveness is, indeed, ensuring maintenance of the languages and cultures of African American, Latina/o, Indigenous American, Asian American, Pacific Islander American, and other longstanding and newcomer communities in our classrooms. (p. 95)

His suggested renaming of the model to “culturally *sustaining* pedagogy” draws attention to the importance of active maintenance of linguistic and cultural plurality in classrooms. In justifying his proposed change, he pointed to current efforts to suppress minority cultures, such as English-only policies and the very legislation (Arizona House Bill 2281) that the students in *Precious Knowledge* are protesting. The project presented in this paper aims to equip teachers with the knowledge and dispositions to counter these policies with a commitment to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 96). This is imperative not only for students marginalized by oppression, but for all students living and preparing to work in our increasingly diverse society. It is not enough for students to respect differences; they must value these differences as prerequisites for the engaged dialogue necessary for a true democracy.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants were the seventeen Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) students in my social studies methods course at a large, Southeastern university during the fall of 2012. Studies of one's own students are subject to questions of credibility, so I addressed this limitation to the best of my ability by keeping written reflections anonymous and emphasizing that the project had no bearing on their grades. I also provided a brief overview of the study and obtained consent to audio record their class discussion. The participants were all between 21-26 years old, except for one who was in his forties. Seven were male and ten were female. One female was black, one male was biracial (black and white), and the rest were white. They were also enrolled in a Social Justice course during this semester, which undoubtedly contributed to their prior knowledge of concepts such as power, oppression, and cultural competence and likely increased their commitment to social justice in education.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Because issues of race and ethnicity were central in the film and this project as a whole, it is important that I reflect on how my own racial/ethnic background may have influenced the research (Madison, 2005). As a white, U.S.-born woman, I have not suffered the effects of racism, neocolonialism, or xenophobia. However, I have witnessed their impacts on the individual, institutional, and global levels as a teacher in the Dominican Republic and in the Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights, New York City. These experiences have made the issue of equity for Latin@ students particularly urgent to me, and the participants knew this. As a result, they may have censored any opinions they had in support of the Arizona bill. On the other hand, my white students may have felt less self-conscious or defensive discussing racism and oppression than they would with an instructor of color, while my students of color may have rightly questioned my authority to lead such discussions.

### **Structure of the Seminar and Data Collection Procedures**

Data were qualitative and consisted of (a) online reflections on video clips and readings assigned prior to this seminar (see Appendix A for prompts and video links), (b) handwritten responses to prompts after viewing the film (see Appendix B), and (c) a whole-class discussion following the viewing. The online responses to readings and video clips were intended to gather some sense of students' prior knowledge and dispositions regarding Latin@ students, the current U.S. immigration climate, and the particular topic they were assigned. In the prior week's seminar, I had divided the class into four groups and assigned each group a reading on one of the following topics: a) the history of Chican@ student activism, b) subtractive schooling, c) variability in Latin@ school success, and d) transformational resistance. Students read their assigned article and then responded to online prompts about their article as well as two video clips as preparation for class.

At the start of class, I briefly gave my rationale for spending an entire four-hour seminar on an issue not typically highlighted in methods courses. I told them that my objectives were to deepen their understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy, civic activism (particularly justice-oriented citizenship), and the Latin@ civil rights movement of the 1960s and today. I also explained that I chose Latin@ civil rights, rather than another racial or ethnic group's, for three reasons. The primary reason is that the state in which the study took place has been described as a "new gateway" (Rong, Thorstenson Dávila, & Hilburn, 2011, p. 99) because immigration has more than tripled in the last twenty years, and most newcomers have been from Latin American countries (Wortham, Murillo Jr. & Hamman, 2002). The second reason is that, in a state still struggling with longstanding racial tensions between its white and black populations, teachers may be more familiar with African American civil rights and culturally relevant pedagogy than

they are with pedagogy for sustaining Latin@ cultures. Finally, my personal experiences teaching Dominican students motivate and inform my concerns with equity for Latin@ youth. I explained to the class the connection between my rationale for selecting *Precious Knowledge* and my teaching objectives for this seminar. We then viewed the film in its entirety.

After viewing the film, students worked with their groups to discuss a set of questions that asked them to synthesize their assigned readings, the film, and their roles as teachers. They did not have to write answers; rather the questions were intended to guide their small group discussions. The assigned readings for each topic and corresponding in-class discussion questions can be found in Appendix C.

Following the small-group discussions, we had a whole-class conversation, which lasted 40 minutes. I asked each group to briefly summarize the article they were assigned and then to share interesting points that came up during their small group discussions. While each group shared, other members of the class contributed their own thoughts even though they had not read that group's particular article. I audio-recorded the whole-class discussion but was not able to record the small-group conversations.

### **Data Analysis**

This is an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) of a researcher-designed film project with one methods cohort. Data were analyzed first through "direct interpretation" (p. 78) and then through several alternating phases of open and focused coding to identify common themes, as well as counterexamples (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This iterative process of seeking alternate explanations increases confidence in the findings (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Written responses were anonymous so I was not able to perform member checks on my interpretations;

however, I implemented “double coding” (Baxter & Jack, 2008) as an alternative means of promoting trustworthiness and credibility.

### **Project Outcomes**

Few scholars using the genre of school films have described how they used them as pedagogical tools for teacher preparation, and fewer still have presented students’ voices in their work (Trier, 2002). Thus I include direct quotes from the participants in order to avoid misrepresentation or misinterpretation and to allow readers to draw their own inferences. However, I did identify a few general themes that seemed to capture many of the teachers’ oral and written comments. These included knowledge of and desire to teach Latin@ social movements, as well as specific ways to engage students in activism. However, stances toward transformational resistance ranged from fearing its ramifications to embracing its potential for motivation and education.

### **Prior Knowledge and Dispositions**

Analysis of students’ online discussion posts prior to the seminar revealed that most participants entered with a degree of critical consciousness related to discrimination in the area of immigration policy<sup>4</sup>. Chris<sup>5</sup> wrote, “I think these laws are a thinly veiled attempt to create an America for whites only.” Jack responded,

When we get bound by laws and use these laws as a barrier to ignore the underlying social issues that are present, we lose out on having authentic interactions. . . I think with diverse classrooms, it is necessary to show the ways in which we create divisions in society; so that we can combat the idea that we can view the world through dichotomies.

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<sup>4</sup> Although *Precious Knowledge* is not about immigration policies, the xenophobia and racist nativism (Pérez Huber, 2008) reflected in the opposition to the MAS program echo the anti-immigration discourses depicted in the video clips.

<sup>5</sup> All names are pseudonyms.



Several also expressed a responsibility to develop critical consciousness in their students. Holly wrote,

Dehumanization of immigrants/illegal immigrants should not be implicit or explicit in any law passed in a country that prides itself on a system of democracy, freedom, and compassion. It is important to teach our students to not only ascribe to the political system, but consider it critically just like the rest of the curriculum.

Others demonstrated a desire to learn more about Chicano@ movements, such as Lexi who attempted to look up the 1968 Edcouch-Elsa High School walkout on Wikipedia and posted that, to her surprise, no such page exists.

However, eight of the seventeen were uncertain of the division of power between state and national governments in enforcing immigration laws, a finding that supports Journell's (2013) argument that many preservice teachers lack deep understanding of current political issues. One post read, "I would assume that the federal government decides about how immigrants can become legal citizens, but the states have the power to enforce making sure that the people living in their states are legal?" Lexi posted, "I wish someone would give me a good run-down of the laws in a non-partisan way." Several, while acknowledging shortcomings in current policies, expressed inability to imagine better ones. Katherine, for instance, wrote, "I have no idea what the right way would be to fix the problems with immigration in America, but these harsh laws don't seem like the right solution."

This did not reduce their interest in teaching about immigration debates, however. Russell wrote, "I think it is incredibly important to teach these issues" and Lexi posted,

I absolutely think this issue should be addressed in social studies classes, not only because it is an issue that is important in our nation (one founded by immigrants and their

descendants) but also because our classrooms are one of the only ways we can guarantee that our students get an education on these issues!

Because the video clips asked students to respond to immigration policies and news media representations, their posts revealed more opinions on this topic than on justice-oriented citizenship or transformational resistance. The group that was assigned the reading on transformational resistance wrote that they had not previously encountered this concept.

Reading their online posts prior to class also helped me pedagogically as I obtained an estimation of their baseline attitudes and knowledge. Over the prior three months I had become familiar with some of the students' political leanings, but not all. Thus the postings informed me that most participants were already frustrated or saddened by the anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation in Arizona and Alabama. For instance, Tim, a white male who was relatively quiet in class and whose political beliefs had not yet become apparent to me, posted, "My opinion of the anti-immigration laws in Arizona and Alabama is that they are racist and unconstitutional." Knowing that all students shared a disapproval of these laws, or at least expressed that they did, assured me that I did not need to provide my rationale for labeling these laws xenophobic and discriminatory. Most also expressed an appreciation for teaching their future students a critical awareness of immigration policy so I abbreviated my planned justification for spending our class time on this topic.

The fact that eight students admitted some degree of confusion regarding states' roles in regulating immigration alerted me that I needed to clarify this for them. I also became aware that some students were nervous about discussing this controversial issue, but that this provided an unintended benefit of helping them empathize with hesitant students and think about strategies for leading discussions on controversial topics in their own classrooms. Kristen wrote,

Commenting on this issue, even in a democratic forum such as our class, is kind of scary to me. It makes me really think about why students do and don't participate in class discussions, and what we may be able to do to effectively evade this problem.

Knowing that some students were nervous influenced me to give them plenty of time in smaller groups to bounce their opinions off others before asking them to share in the large focus group. Students were also required to respond to one another's posts, so they entered with some awareness of the opinions of their peers. This may have increased their comfort level in sharing their own perspectives.

### **Latin@ Civil Rights Struggles: Knowledge Gained and Ideas for Curricular Inclusion**

The film and readings presented new information about Latin@ struggles to the preservice teachers, allowing them to “learn more about their students’ backgrounds, cultures, and experiences” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36) and providing the tools necessary for them to “deconstruct, construct, and reconstruct” the traditional history curriculum which typically limits Latino history to the battle of the Alamo and the Mexican-American War. Tim, who has a degree in history, wrote in his pre-seminar post, “Previously, I have rarely studied about the civil rights struggle of Mexican Americans.” When asked in the whole-class discussion if any had studied the 1960s student walkouts, they all responded no. In the anonymous post-film reflections, one student wrote, “I never really thought about the historical context of Latin@ history and how it's not covered in any classes currently. I feel like students want to learn about their culture but are denied.” Another wrote, “I was not aware of the legislation or the class in Arizona. . . I was aware that there were struggles, oppression, etc. and I was aware that student movements had occurred, but I knew no details.”

Students also generated suggestions for including this topic in an already crowded history curriculum. Given the pressure on social studies teachers to prepare students for standardized exams covering an overwhelming range of standards (Grant & Salinas, 2008), it is not surprising that some students were uncertain they would have time to delve into these topics. However in the focus group discussion, Jared offered a solution:

I think this is difficult because if you're going to redo the [state standards], you have to redo the test at the end of the year. I already feel it is a backwards test that asks questions that are 20 or 30 years old. However I do see the potential here for collaborative learning with English because a lot of the English classes don't have [high stakes tests]. So if you have a good enough relationship with English teachers here you can say, "Hey, do you mind covering some of this so we can work toward the common goal of critical thinking and critical consciousness?"

Other students offered specific suggestions such as having students read Gabriel García Márquez, or even work around the state standards by proposing to teach your own elective class to include this topic. Overall the group felt optimistic about including more Latin@ movements, people, and perspectives in their history classes. These statements suggest students not only had a desire to teach in culturally sustaining ways, but also could generate ideas on how to do so, even within a standardized curriculum.

### **Transformational Resistance: Some Confidence and Some Reluctance**

There was less agreement on the importance or even appropriateness of teaching justice-oriented citizenship and transformational resistance than there was on teaching Latin@ civil rights. Some teachers saw the potential for active engagement to motivate students: "The film

shows that the key is passion. You have to find an area that the students care about then engage them in civic action. Just another reason to get to know your students.” Another teacher wrote,

the seminar further inspired me to teach these and other movements to my students and to instill in them the idea that they should stand up and fight for what they believe in, both through letters to politicians, policy, and through activism.

As indicated in this quote, not only did some teachers increase their desire to engage students in transformational resistance, but they also had concrete ideas for doing so. Suggestions from other teachers included: “write to a congressman or protest to get involved or they could observe what is happening in their community”; “showing up to public forums, preparing to participate”; and participating “in an activist movement of their choice.” As Hackman (2005) advised, “Teaching about issues of oppression without proffering social action tools for students ultimately creates a classroom atmosphere that lacks hope and creative energy” (p. 106). Instead, these teachers have identified specific ways to engage their students in action for social change, Hackman’s third component of social justice education and a component of Westheimer and Kahn’s (2004) justice-oriented citizenship.

Related to Hackman’s notion of teaching for social change is Solorzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) concept of transformational resistance, which requires a critique of social oppression and an explicit social justice aim. One participant demonstrated belief in student agency and resistance through her statement that the seminar gave her ideas for “teaching students to be self advocates and involve themselves in decisions that affect them.”

However, not all teachers were comfortable with encouraging students’ civil disobedience or even with the type of pedagogy depicted in the film. Regarding the latter, one wrote that the instruction seemed to be “[almost like reverse] indoctrination” (original

punctuation). During class discussion, Jack made a similar statement: “It seems like they were saying this is a way to live a good and valuable life and therefore this is what you should believe.” He added, “I was confused as to what exactly they were trying to teach.” Elizabeth replied that she viewed the MAS class as similar to college courses with “studies” in the title, such as Women’s Studies or Native American Studies. She explained that these courses are a little bit of everything. Chris addressed his critique about indoctrination in the MAS classes by asking, “Is it not indoctrination when you’re teaching civics and promoting democracy as the ideal system?” Thus, the teachers demonstrated a range of attitudes toward the MAS classes and the transformational resistance promoted within them.

In terms of encouraging their own students to engage in resistance through civic activism, some teachers were nervous about ramifications. Two participants wrote they were concerned about or disagreed with the idea of placing students in situations where they could be arrested. Others cited petitions and voter drives as examples of how they would involve students, steering clear of higher risk strategies such as sit-ins or picketing. Acts of civil disobedience are not the only form of justice-oriented citizenship or transformational resistance however. Also included would be any action that is “political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change is possible” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 320). The fact that teachers offered alternative forms of activism indicated that they saw that justice-oriented citizenship did not necessarily require putting their students or their jobs at risk.

### **Limitations**

Prior to this project, the participants had already demonstrated questioning of dominant discourses and the desire to be culturally sustaining. This may be related to their Social Justice course as well as their personalities, backgrounds as humanities majors, and decisions to apply to

a social justice-oriented graduate program. Preservice teachers at other institutions may respond differently to this type of project. However, I would recommend that methods instructors in such contexts still incorporate this or similar projects, perhaps even more so *because* students may have had less prior exposure.

The relationship between the participants and myself as the researcher/methods instructor may have prompted teachers to give the answers they thought I wanted to hear. This is not only because I assign grades, but also because they wished to be respectful of my interest in Latin@ student equity and to help me accomplish my teaching and research goals. I addressed this as well as I could by keeping written reflections anonymous and encouraging dissenting opinions. The divergent opinions that emerged during class discussion suggests that at least some students felt comfortable enough to disagree and even critique the MAS program depicted in the film.

### **Suggested Improvements to the Project**

Ideally, such a project would last more than one seminar, to give teachers more time to reflect on initial knowledge and dispositions. One student mentioned in the written reflection that more time to discuss the film would have been valuable. Realistically, time constraints may prohibit teacher educators from devoting more time to the project. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to explore ways the project could be improved and expanded. Trier (2013) made an excellent recommendation that students first respond to the film by writing a response aligned with the filmmakers' goals, along with an oppositional and a negotiated response (Trier, 2013). In this way they could explore multiple perspectives and better understand the opposing viewpoints presented in the film and in educational policy debates. Teachers may then be better prepared to anticipate and address parents' or administrators' potential opposition to bicultural pedagogy and student activism or resistance. If possible, I would also invite local Latin@ community members

or perhaps activists, to provide their personal perspectives on the film. This would have been particularly helpful for this class because Latin@ voices were conspicuously absent from our discussion.

Also like Trier, I would have participants spend more time reading and discussing the theories addressed in the activity. Ideally, all class members would read all four of the articles (Appendix C), rather than each group reading only one. In response to the question of how the project could be improved, one participant suggested giving at least excerpts of all four articles to every student. The four different topics presented (i.e., Chican@ student movements, subtractive schooling, current educational contexts for Latin@ students, and transformational resistance) are each worthy of in-depth study, but assigning all four, along with regular class readings, written responses, and video responses would have overwhelmed the students. I would also like students to read research related to the impacts of ethnic studies programs on high school students, prior to viewing the film. One implication of the impossibility of fitting all of these readings and assignments into a methods course is that teacher education programs should consider offering an entire course or at least more time devoted to culturally sustaining social studies teaching.

## **Implications**

### **Implications For Practice**

This study has implications for both secondary social studies teachers and teacher educators. Social studies teachers should consider greater curricular attention to Latin@ civil rights movements, especially if their student population includes Latin@ students. They could pair instruction on the 1960s Chican@ student movements with current student protests



occurring in Arizona and other states. Asking students to compare and contrast these efforts may promote appreciation of history as having direct relevance to current struggles. Furthermore, these sorts of lessons are essential components of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012).

Social studies teachers should also pair these lessons with opportunities for social action (Hackman, 2005). Civics teachers in particular may consider using *Precious Knowledge* to demonstrate that teenagers can make an impact through political engagement and inspire students to identify social problems they personally find troubling. Students could then analyze the historical, political, and social roots of these problems so that their activism could be both motivated by desire for social justice and informed by a critique of oppression, characteristics required for justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Teacher educators could use an adaptation of this project or a similar activity with another documentary to present ideas and start conversations with social studies teachers on these issues. *Precious Knowledge* is particularly powerful because it illustrates that high school students can develop critical consciousness and engage in transformative political action. This counters common perceptions of U.S. youth as apathetic and disengaged. The project can not only model culturally sustaining pedagogy for teachers as well as how to teach civic activism, it can also address the relatively low political awareness of many preservice teachers (Journell, 2013). For instance, these participants gained a better understanding of state versus federal government roles in enforcing immigration policies.

### **Implications for Research**

I hope that other scholars may use this example to brainstorm additional pedagogical uses for school documentaries or other pertinent films. There is a growing body of literature on

pedagogical uses of film for teacher education (e.g., Giroux, 1993; Trier, 2002, 2013), however much more is needed. In particular, there are few studies on film in social studies methods courses and fewer still on films for teaching citizenship or culturally sustaining pedagogy to social studies teachers. Future researchers could provide more comprehensive results of such projects by following participants into their first years of teaching and documenting effects of these methods on their classroom instruction.

### **Conclusion**

Having taught high school civics and other social studies for many years, I remember the difficulty of finding relevant real-world opportunities for students to become politically active. This paper suggests that teacher educators could use *Precious Knowledge* or other films on student activism to provide preservice teachers ideas for engaging students in transformative and justice-oriented citizenship. The paper extends the work of teacher educators who have used films in methods courses (Giroux, 1998; Trier, 2002, 2003) by focusing on the objectives of civic activism, social justice, and Latin@ civil rights. This study also responds to Trier's (2002) call for participant voices to be included in analysis of film use with preservice teachers. Finally, the appendices provide suggested readings, preparatory assignments, and discussion questions that teacher educators can borrow or adapt for their own uses.

Ladson-Billings (2006) responded to teachers' complaints that "everyone keeps telling us about multicultural education, but nobody is telling us how to do it!" (p. 39) by explaining that culturally relevant pedagogy is more of an ethical position than it is a set of teaching strategies. Likewise, Valenzuela's (1999) notion of additive schooling based on authentic caring focuses more on teachers' dispositions and relationships with students than on their specific instructional decisions. Future and current teachers, who may be more familiar with the add-on model of

multicultural education, can learn from the examples of the MAS teachers. These teachers demonstrate Ladson-Billings' and Valenzuela's models by focusing on long-term academic goals of students, developing their sociopolitical consciousness, and helping them "recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36). Teachers and teacher educators may be interested in the potential for *Precious Knowledge* or other films to enhance educators' abilities to facilitate transformative activism in all students and to reverse patterns of subtractive schooling and high pushout rates for Latin@ students in particular.

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