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## INTRODUCTION

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Consider the challenge of introducing the concept of “heteronormativity” to a classroom predominantly made up of heterosexual teacher candidates who are relatively new to conversations about homophobia and heterosexism. Imagine you are teaching a course on social justice or multicultural education, perhaps the only class your students will take that will broach these topics explicitly. You are charged with facilitating experiences that will prepare future teachers to understand, both conceptually and pragmatically, what it means to create an equitable and just learning environment for every student and family. Given your experience and expertise, however limited you acknowledge them to be, you believe that, for your students to grasp concepts like heterosexism or to strengthen their abilities to recognize subtle forms of heterosexual privilege in their pedagogies, in school policies, or in curricular materials, you first must help cultivate in them a deep understanding of “heteronormativity”—a formidable task.

Failure to guide your students successfully toward a nuanced awareness of this concept could result in a learning “bottleneck,” a sort of collective comprehension backup that occurs when educators struggle to facilitate effective learning around a foundational concept or competency—what Meyer and Land (2003) have called “threshold concepts.” When this happens, the learning process literally becomes cluttered or clogged. As a result, progress toward bigger learning goals and understandings may stall or fizzle.

Making matters all the more challenging, every semester some of your students resist outright any conversation suggesting that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer people experience bias or oppression at all, or that their experiences belong in a conversation about “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” or “social justice.” Others argue on misinformed scientific or even

religious grounds that heterosexuality *is* normal, so it only makes sense that anything other than heterosexuality would be deemed abnormal, if not deviant. And every week you fight the temptation to interpret these responses as hostile or judgmental. You have turned to colleagues in search of pedagogical strategies only to learn that the challenge you face is a common one; you turn to the research literature and find, in fact, that the challenge is well documented there (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010).

In fact, you remember some of your earliest exposures to conversations about social justice, perhaps in a college class very much like the one you now are teaching, when it seemed as though what you were learning conflicted with many of the other messages you were hearing about *what* and *how* you ought to think. This reminiscing is comforting for a moment, but the difficult truth remains: you must find a way to help your students understand and examine this thing called “heteronormativity.” If you fail to do so, you limit the extent to which they will grasp the complexity of a variety of other concepts and competencies. In other words, if you fail to do so, you might leave your students stuck in that learning bottleneck.

We, the coeditors of this book, have been there, if not specifically in regard to our students’ struggles to understand “heteronormativity,” then in our attempts to find effective pedagogical strategies for teaching about Christian hegemony or patriarchy or *something* as deeply as we would have liked. From *hegemony* and *deficit ideology* to *White privilege* and *essentialism*, we have tried and failed and tried again to puzzle through many of the common bottlenecks that crop up in social justice and multicultural teacher education contexts. We have struggled, tripped, reformulated our pedagogies, read incessantly, interviewed our students, and engaged in action research. We have attempted, in most every conceivable way, to ensure that our students appreciate the foundational concepts and competencies—the *threshold* concepts and competencies—that will bolster their development as equity- and justice-minded educators. And, like you, perhaps, we sometimes have felt as though we may never quite get there.

Partially out of frustration with these challenges, we started to think and talk about what might help us, as teacher educators, do a better job teaching social justice threshold concepts and avoiding, or at least more effectively mitigating, common social justice learning bottlenecks. What we did too rarely, we came to believe, was to share with each other the sorts of pedagogical challenges and student (as well as colleague) resistance that make our work unique from teaching, say, mainstream history or biology. The social

justice and multicultural teacher education literatures are increasingly exploring these and other challenges: the implications of student resistance to learning about topics like systemic racism and Christian hegemony (de Courcy, 2007; Gayle-Evans & Michael, 2006; Thomas & Vanderhaar, 2008); the larger sociopolitical context in which today's teacher education programs are situated (Grant, 2004; Hursh, 2005; Sleeter, 2008); and the general messiness of feeling like we are teaching, at times, against virtually every other influence in some of our students' lives (Bruna, 2007; Gorski, 2010; Reed & Black, 2006). Similarly, there is an increasingly robust literature on concepts and theoretical frameworks related to, say, *patriarchy* and its implications on schooling. There is a growing body of scholarship defining contemporary forms of patriarchy, examining intersectionalities around patriarchy, using patriarchy as a conceptual lens for critically analyzing all sorts of educational phenomena, and even documenting student resistance to discussions of patriarchy or feminist pedagogy. However, there is very little on exploring how to teach these concepts in teacher education contexts. The result is that we, the collective "we" of social justice teacher educators, seem to spend considerably more of our scholarly and pedagogical energies examining resistance to the notion of patriarchy and explicating the significance of patriarchy than considering how we might improve the ways we help future educators understand its influence on schooling.

Exceptions exist, of course. Although the social justice and multicultural education literatures addressing the bottleneck phenomenon and identifying "threshold concepts" are thin, they do include some attention to teacher educators' and others' challenges with helping students understand and apply concepts like deficit ideology, Christian hegemony, and White privilege, among others (e.g., Aveling, 2006; Bannick & van Dam, 2007; Case & Hemmings, 2005; Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Mueller & O'Connor, 2007; Sleeter, 2001; Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). A more limited subset of this scholarship identifies pedagogical responses to these challenges (Gorski, 2009; Klug, Luckey, Wilkins, & Whitfield, 2006; Lucas, 2005; Moss, 2008; Pennington, 2007). However, in most of these cases, attention to the challenge of teaching complex and critical concepts is tangential.

What remain nearly invisible in both of these literatures and, in our own experiences, at the few conferences and workshops meant to strengthen social justice teacher educators' practice, are concerted and sustained conversations among social justice teacher educators about common content- and pedagogy-related challenges we face in our work. Particularly for those of us

doing this work in relative or literal isolation, where collegial understanding cannot be found down the hall or around the corner, we feel, as social justice teacher educators, that a more thoughtful attempt to engage in a collaborative exploration of these challenges could bolster our individual practice in the short run. More important, if sustained, such efforts might strengthen social justice teacher education more systemically in the long run.

### **A Primer on Threshold Concepts and Learning Bottlenecks**

Every discipline, field, and movement has its threshold concepts and its common cognitive bottlenecks. For example, Middendorf, Pace, Shopkow, and Díaz (2007), drawing on in-depth interviews of history professors, identified seven common bottlenecks of college- and university-level history education. History students, they found, tended to struggle to identify with people from another time and place, interpret primary sources, and understand the role and nature of “facts” from a historical perspective. These were the concepts and competencies the interviewees considered to be among the cognitive building blocks, or *threshold concepts*, for learners of history. They knew that their students needed these skills to mature as historical thinkers, but they overwhelmingly agreed that, semester after semester, their students continued to struggle to understand them. And their instructors were not much help. In fact, Middendorf et al. found that professors regularly struggled to help their students make progress in dealing with these and other concepts or competencies. And so, in dealing these critical concepts, the students often were left cognitively stuck.

When the professors were asked how much time and energy they had spent reflecting on *how* they were facilitating student learning around these threshold concepts—how much energy they were putting into strengthening their pedagogical strategies, their curricular materials, and the levels of student engagement they were encountering—they revealed that they had spent very little time and energy doing so. Similarly, we, the editors of this volume, recognize our own lack of effort exploring how to teach threshold concepts related to social justice.

Threshold concepts are critical to social justice teacher education because, if students are unable to grasp them in deep and integrated ways, they have little chance of developing complex understandings of a whole network of other social justice–related concepts (Meyer, Land, & Davies, 2006). For example, if I struggle to grasp the connection between corporate

capitalism and the test-score-centric framing of the “achievement gap” discourse in the United States, it will be difficult for me to understand why deficit ideological approaches to mitigating the socioeconomic achievement gap—approaches focused on fixing economically disadvantaged people rather than the conditions that disadvantage them—are problematic. Failure to understand what is problematic about deficit ideology likely will hamper my ability to reverse, or even to recognize, how symptoms of class inequity are playing out in my classroom or school.

Equally important about threshold concepts is the fact that, as research has shown, once an individual develops a deep understanding of one of them—once she or he *crosses* a cognitive threshold—the likelihood of reverting to previous ways of knowing is extremely slim (Meyer & Land, 2003). Timmermans (2010) explains,

Thus, on a path of development from one way of knowing and meaning-making, one epistemic stage or stance to the next, there seems to exist a point in our journey when we cross a threshold and our old way of knowing is no longer “tenable.” There is an irreversible shift in the way in which “essence” is coordinated. There emerges a new space from which to observe and analyze the world. (p. 13)

Many of us have observed students at various times leaping, sprinting, or, with every ounce of their energy, crawling across that point in their journeys, shifting from a “colorblind” perspective to a racial justice perspective or from a view that interprets poverty as a “culture” to one that interprets it as an unjust social condition. And, of course, many of us have felt what it is like to cross one of those thresholds; to realize that what we thought we knew was more ideology than reality. Imagine how much more effective we, as social justice teacher educators, could be if we understood those moments better, if we knew how to help our students approach them more consciously. Imagine how your students’ experiences might be different if you strengthened your ability to take full advantage of what Meyer and Land (2005) call the “reconstitutive effect of threshold concepts” (p. 375). How might our teacher education classrooms be different if we had better strategies for helping students manage what Cousin (2006) describes as the “liminal state,” when learners are caught in dissonance as they grapple with the possibilities of new ways of seeing in light of old ways of knowing.

Critical to understanding the nature of threshold concepts and learning bottlenecks, particularly those related to social justice, is this: It’s not that

most students in teacher education do not *want* to learn these concepts and competencies, or that they do not *want* to create and sustain equitable and just learning environments—not for the most part, at least. Bottlenecks form for a wide variety of interrelated reasons. In the social justice education context, one complexity lies in the fact that the most well-meaning teacher educators and students alike have much to *unlearn* before transformational social justice learning can commence. Another complexity is the challenge inherent in the very process of attempting to facilitate learning experiences around a discipline or movement like social justice or multicultural education. In many ways, this task requires each of us to be a sort of social justice generalist, as pedagogically competent teaching about economic injustice as about heteronormativity, systemic racism, patriarchy, and intersectionalities, and attempting to do all of this in what inevitably turns out to be too little time.

The scarcity of time itself ratchets up the pressure to do all we can do to facilitate in our students an understanding of foundational concepts and competencies while we do have access to them, if only to help provide building blocks for their ongoing development as social justice-minded teachers. Plus, as Timmermans (2010) explains in her exploration of the transformational nature of threshold concepts, “there may exist highly individual reasons determining responses to threshold concepts, reasons such as alternative [cognitive] commitments and readiness for change” (p. 11). Inevitably, this combination of conditions, in addition to all sorts of other contextual factors such as where we teach, who our students are, and our own biases and dispositions, collude to ensure that we will not always do as good a job as we would like to do helping students learn and apply all of the concepts and competencies that are essential to social justice teaching and learning. In light of this reality, we believe it is crucial that we prepare ourselves as well as we can to provide all students with the best possible chance of developing deep and complex comprehensions and applications of social justice-related threshold concepts and to avoid the sorts of learning bottlenecks that may hinder their chances of doing so.

*Cultivating Social Justice Teachers: How Teacher Educators Have Helped Students Overcome Cognitive Bottlenecks and Learn Critical Social Justice Concepts* represents one collaborative attempt to hasten this exploration. We invited social justice teacher educators to share their trials, their tribulations, and, of course, their triumphs teaching threshold concepts related to multicultural and social justice education. We asked our contributors to identify a learning bottleneck related to one or two specific threshold concepts that

they, at times, struggled to help their students overcome. Rather than simply providing a theoretical exploration of these concepts or pontificating on likely cognitive or sociopolitical sources of the bottlenecks, contributors agreed to tell how they came to find strategies for facilitating through them, despite the challenges they faced doing so. Each chapter, then, is, among other things, a narrative about individual efforts toward sometimes profound pedagogical adjustment, about ambiguity and cognitive dissonance and resistance, about trial and error and trial, and about a radical determination on the part of social justice teacher educators to find ways to facilitate foundational social justice learning among a diversity of education students. Although this is not intended to be a how-to manual or to provide *five easy steps for teaching every heterosexual man about heteronormative patriarchy*, each chapter does describe practical strategies that you might adapt as part of your own teacher education practice.

### Introduction to Remaining Chapters

We begin with “The Art of Teaching Intersectionality” (chapter 2), in which Nana Osei-Kofi describes the arts-based pedagogies she has developed to help her students understand and apply intersectionality theory.

Stephanie Jones and James F. Woglom collaborate on “Overcoming Nomos” (chapter 3), a graphic novel–style exploration of strategies for helping students dissect hegemonic thinking about what is and is not “normal.”

Mollie V. Blackburn details how she has come to use and sequence feature films to teach about the complexities of gender expression and heteronormativity in “Learning to Tell a Pedagogical Story About Heteronormativity” (chapter 4).

In “Overcoming Deficit Thinking Through Interpretive Discussion” (chapter 5), Curt Dudley-Marling describes how he has helped teachers shift from a deficit approach to a social constructivist perspective through interpretive question-posing and deep, reflective, discussion.

Paul C. Gorski shares the struggles he has experienced and the strategies he has developed while engaging his students in critical examinations of dominant discourses about poverty and schooling in “Teaching Against Essentialism and the ‘Culture of Poverty’” (chapter 6).

In “Disrupting Denial and White Privilege in Teacher Education” (chapter 7), Darren E. Lund and Paul R. Carr offer exercises and insights for teaching through denial and toward racial equity in predominantly White contexts.

Warren J. Blumenfeld discusses how he engages even the most hostile students in explorations of Christian privilege in “Teaching About Christian Privilege in the Teacher Education Classroom” (chapter 8).

“From Literacy to Literacies: Using Photography to Help Teachers See What Youth Can Do” (chapter 9), by Kristien Zenkov, Athene Bell, Mariam Ewaida, Megan R. Lynch, and James Harmon, documents how a group of educators has worked to expand conceptions of “literacy” by equipping students with cameras and asking them to document their educational experiences.

Edward M. Olivos discusses how he helps his students become better advocates for immigrant students by developing a deeper, more contextualized understanding of immigration in “Teaching and Learning About Immigration as a Humanitarian Issue: The Sociopolitical Context Bottleneck” (chapter 10).

In “‘You’re Going to Hell!’: When Critical Multicultural Queer Affirmation Meets Christian Homophobia” (chapter 11), Jeff Sapp highlights how he uses an affirming queer pedagogy and a deep knowledge of the Biblical passages people cite to justify homophobia in an attempt to engage even the most reluctant of his students at the intersections of sexual orientation and religion.

Finally, Jody Cohen and Alice Lesnick share a strategy they call “overlaying,” in which various social or classroom conditions are understood in relation to one another, as a way to uncover the myth of meritocracy in “Beyond Open-Mindedness: How ‘Overlaying’ Can Help Foster Impactful Discussions of Meritocracy in Teacher Education Classrooms” (chapter 12).

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