

# Striving for Critical Reflection in Multicultural and Social Justice Teacher Education: Introducing a Typology of Reflection Approaches

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Paul C. Gorski<sup>1</sup>  and Kelly Dalton<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Multicultural and social justice teacher education (MSJTE) scholars often have argued the importance of critical reflection in the cultivation of equity and social justice minded educators. In this critical content analysis study, we used existing conceptualizations of critical reflection to analyze reflection assignments from MSJTE courses in education degree and licensing programs in the United States to identify the nature of critical reflection incorporated into them and what distinguished critical reflection opportunities from other reflective assignments. Based on this analysis, we offer the beginnings of a typology of five approaches to reflection in multicultural and social justice education courses: (a) amorphous “cultural” reflection, (b) personal identity reflection, (c) cultural competence reflection, (d) equitable and just school reflection, and (e) social transformation reflection. We describe the characteristics of each and the role they might play in MSJTE contexts.

## Keywords

reflection, multicultural teacher education, social justice, multicultural education, preservice teacher education, critical education

## Introduction

Reflection is an important aspect of transformative learning—the kind of learning that shifts students’ worldviews and understandings of themselves (Brooks, 2000; Mezirow, 1991). Due to its transformative potential, reflection has also been described as an integral part of multicultural and social justice teacher education (MSJTE; Liu & Milman, 2010; Nieto, 2006). In particular, research has consistently demonstrated how reflective learning activities can encourage educators to examine their biases (Lin & Lucey, 2010; Pang, 2005) and positionalities related to privilege (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Nieto, 2000), develop sophisticated understandings of oppression (Morley & Fook, 2005), and strengthen their overall commitments to educational justice (Grant & Sleeter, 2010).

Despite these potentials, one criticism of reflection pedagogy is that it can become too inwardly focused and self-absorbed (Finlay, 2002). Oftentimes, education students are guided through reflective activities to better understand their worldviews and perspectives and to become conscious of their assumptions (Brookfield, 2015; Mezirow, 1991). However, for reflective experiences to support a more complete commitment to the educational justice goals of MSJTE (Au, 2017; Marshall, 2015), teacher educators cannot focus solely on changing students’ hearts; they must help students

understand the relationships between their ideologies and the sociopolitical conditions that underlie them to help change those conditions (Liu, 2015). The “end” cannot be personal transformation related to individual bias (Smith, 2011), as important as that goal is. Rather, it should include “restructuring” individuals’ actions to participate in educational justice efforts (Ryan & Ryan, 2013).

Transformative education scholars (Cranton, 2013; Ryan & Ryan, 2013) and MSJTE scholars (Liu & Milman, 2014; Nieto, 2006) have referred to reflection pedagogies that embrace these more structural justice-oriented goals as *critical reflection*. Liu (2015) described critical reflection in MSJTE as

a process of constantly analysing, questioning, and critiquing established assumptions of oneself, schools, and the society about teaching and learning, and the social and political implications of schooling, and implementing changes to previous actions that have been supported by those established

<sup>1</sup>Equity Literacy Institute, Asheville, NC, USA

<sup>2</sup>Marymount University, Arlington, VA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Paul C. Gorski, Equity Literacy Institute, Asheville, NC 28806, USA.  
Email: gorski@edchange.org

assumptions for the purpose of supporting student learning and a better schooling and more just society for all children. (pp. 10-11)

Despite agreement among MSJTE and critical reflection scholars about the importance of critical reflection and the need for reflection approaches that deepen more “liberal” multicultural objectives such as examining personal bias or learning to appreciate diversity (McLaren, 1995), little agreement exists about what critical reflection looks like in practice, particularly in MSJTE contexts (Liu, 2015). Interpretations range from learning activities that cultivate “the ability to think conceptually and systematically” to a social theory approach that focuses on power and justice (Theobald, Gardner, & Long, 2017, p. 300).

To date, scholarship examining the nature of critical reflection in education programs has focused on the impact of reflection assignments or reflection-based course pedagogies in individual courses (e.g., Acquah & Commins, 2015; Liu, 2017). Little research has examined more broadly the types or nature of reflection adopted by people who teach MSJTE courses. To begin developing a broader picture of critical reflection in MSJTE, this study was designed to parse out the types of reflection teacher educators across the United States incorporate into these courses via course assignments and what differentiates critical approaches from other reflection approaches.

In service to this goal, we present an analysis of reflection assignments as described in MSJTE course syllabi drawn from a sample of MSJTE courses taught in education degree and licensure programs in the United States. Using critical content analysis (Short, 2017), we examined assignment descriptions with these questions in mind: To what extent are reflection assignments in MSJTE courses designed to encourage critical reflection? What is the nature of critical reflection as facilitated in critical reflection-oriented assignments?

Through our analysis a third question arose unexpectedly: What is the nature of reflection assignments that reflect more liberal or conservative approaches to MSJTE? The result of this second layer of analysis was a new typology of reflection approaches in MSJTE.

To be clear, our intention was not to “judge” the criticality of entire MSJTE courses through an analysis of assignments. Assignments represent one of many ways teacher educators incorporate reflection into their pedagogies. Our intention, instead, was to analyze the assignments to describe essential aspects of conservative, liberal, and critical approaches to reflection and what each approach might look like in practice. We chose to use course assignments as a starting point for this mapping because we could attain access to a sample of full assignment descriptions from dozens of courses from a wide variety of contexts across the United States more readily than, for example, observing dozens of courses throughout entire semesters across the United States. This study allowed us to develop a framework for specific

differences in various types of “reflection” activities that can be an important tool in similar research focusing on course observations and other means for examining approaches to reflection in multicultural and social justice education settings.

## Literature Review

This study was informed by scholarship on approaches to MSJTE, critical reflection, and the impact of, and challenges associated with, incorporating critical reflection into education contexts.

### *Multicultural Teacher Education Approaches*

Drawing on McLaren’s (1995) description of approaches to multiculturalism, Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol (2001) articulated three parallel approaches to MSJTE: conservative, liberal, and critical. Conservative MSJTE is assimilationist, preparing teachers to help marginalized students adopt “American” values. Liberal MSJTE rejects assimilationism; it embraces pluralism and attends to individual bias—worthy pursuits. Teacher educators who embrace liberal MSJTE without also embracing aspects of critical MSJTE might avoid matters of power, privilege, and oppression, potentially leaving educators ill-equipped to address racial, economic, or other injustices (Jenks et al., 2001). Critical MSJTE centralizes questions of power. It prioritizes preparing educators to be forces for social reconstruction (Grant & Sleeter, 2010). Although MSJTE scholars have been largely critical of conservative approaches (Gorski, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006) and fairly critical of liberal approaches (McLaren, 1995; St Denis, 2011), their concern appears to be less about the presence of liberal approaches than the absence of critical approaches. In other words, we could not find a single MSJTE scholar who argued against the importance of learning about personal bias, but many have argued against, for example, omitting considerations of structural racism from educational equity discourses (Au, 2017; Gorski, 2019a; Sleeter, 1996).

Based on a content analysis of MSJTE courses in the United States, Gorski (2009b) expanded Jenks et al.’s (2001) three approaches into the following five MSJTE approaches:

1. Conservative approach: Teaching the “other”
2. Liberal approach 1: Teaching with cultural sensitivity and tolerance
3. Liberal approach 2: Teaching with multicultural competence
4. Critical approach 1: Teaching in sociopolitical context
5. Critical approach 2: Teaching as resistance and counter-hegemonic practice (Gorski, 2009b).

As mentioned earlier, MSJTE scholars have highlighted the dangers of failing to adopt a critical approach to MSJTE and

settling, instead, solely for conservative or liberal approaches. By focusing on goals such as assimilation and celebrating diversity without attending to more critical goals, these approaches can cultivate in educators a false sense of preparedness to advocate for equity while obscuring the realities of racism, economic injustice, and other forms of oppression (Au, 2014; St Denis, 2009). As a result, without some amount of critical framing they may not adequately prepare educators to understand and respond to educational and societal injustices. This makes them inconsistent with MSJTE's most critical theoretical commitments to social action (Sleeter, 1996), critical pedagogy (Nieto & Bode, 2011), and social justice (Gorski, 2009a).

Despite these theoretical commitments, Gorski's (2009b) aforementioned analysis of MSJTE courses in the United States revealed that most were designed with solely conservative or liberal goals in mind. Only 26.7% of the examined courses incorporated a critical approach. Again, the concern, as Gorski (2009b) explained, was not the presence of liberal MSJTE in the courses, but the absence of any critical framing. This finding mirrored concerns raised by other MSJTE scholars that generally MSJTE does not adequately prepare educators to create anti-oppressive schools (Vavrus, 2014).

### Conceptualizing Critical Reflection

Reflection often is described as a key element of MSJTE, particularly as it pertains to learning about equity and justice (Grant & Sleeter, 2010; Morgan, 2017). In the context of transformative learning theory, education scholars have long advocated reflection as a method for helping learners examine their beliefs and actions (Dewey, 1933; Hatton & Smith, 1995). If learners can strengthen their abilities to do so, not just in retrospect but also in day-to-day practice—while interacting with economically marginalized children, for example—they are better prepared to adjust their ideologies or worldviews toward a social justice stance, which is a goal of transformative learning (Schön, 1983) and MSJTE (Morgan, 2017).

Transformative learning scholars use the term *critical reflection* to refer to reflection that helps prepare the person reflecting to advocate for social justice and social reconstruction (Cranton, 2013; Ryan & Ryan, 2013). It centers power explicitly, requiring learners to consider their positionalities in systems of privilege and oppression and how those positionalities influence their thought and action (Foucault, 1982; Smith, 2011). Like critical MSJTE, critical reflection challenges learners to see themselves as transformers, not just of their own values but also of the institutions and societies with which they interact (Liu, 2015; McNaughton, 2016).

In a formal educational setting, a reflection activity might challenge learners to “think about how they come to know what they know” (Koliba, 2004, p. 308)—a worthy undertaking. A *critical reflection* assignment might challenge them to consider the implications of what they know and

how they came to know it within a context of structural racism, transphobia, and other oppressions (Garneau, 2016). It might go a step further, challenging learners to explicate their participation in, and responsibilities for eliminating, injustice (Canada-Phillips, 2014; Smith, 2011). This connection to application—to practice, activism, advocacy—is central to critical reflection. In a study of the effects of reflection and critical reflection in programs involving dialogue between Palestinian and Israeli youth, Ross (2015) found that participants exposed to critical reflection, focusing not just on considering one another's stories but also on understanding positionalities and power structures, were more likely to become involved in social justice-oriented change efforts. Studies on the impact of critical reflection outside teacher education have demonstrated its potential to deepen learners' understandings of their positionalities relative to power and oppression (Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Rosen, McCall, & Goodkind, 2017; White & Guthrie, 2015) and strengthen their commitments to apply what the reflection bears, acting against injustice (Bennet, Power, Thomson, Mason, & Bartleet, 2016).

It is important to note that varying conceptions exist about what constitutes social justice and what constitutes participating in anti-oppressive change or justice-oriented action (Theobald et al., 2017). Critical reflection scholars have not been prescriptive about what this looks like in practice. Instead, they have described the purposes of critical reflection more generally around goals such as helping educators examine their positionalities (Acquah & Commins, 2015), adopt a structural anti-oppression view rather than a deficit view (Morgan, 2017), and develop deeper and more structural insights about equity and justice (Alger, 2006) to, in Liu's words, “support[t] student learning and a better schooling and more just society for all children” (pp. 10-11). It is less about directing specific actions than preparing people with the depth of understanding necessary to enact anti-oppressive change in their varying spheres of influence with the depth of understanding necessary to recognize when particular actions might reproduce injustice (Morley & Fook, 2005).

### Critical Reflection Impact and Challenges

Critical reflection scholars and MSJTE scholars have highlighted the importance of critical reflection in teacher education. Answering Sleeter's (1996) call to frame multicultural education as social activism, critical reflection can strengthen educators' agency as advocates of justice-oriented change (Collay, 2014; Felton & Koestler, 2015). This might include spotting and dismantling deficit views of students experiencing poverty (Morgan, 2017), helping students develop critical media literacy by examining the influence of power on knowledge (Smith, 2011), or challenging unjust policies or practices in their schools (Ross, 2015)—which have been linked to students' exposure to critical reflection. Studies of

critical reflection in MSJTE have also shown that it deepens students' understandings of their power and privilege (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Liu & Milman, 2014). For example, based on their case study of school sites in which critical reflection was used to help teachers examine their teaching practice, Saito and Khong (2017) found that over time participants became less likely to hold deficit views of students and more likely to consider their own roles in students' struggles. Similarly, in a study of education leadership students in a program that emphasized critical reflection, Collay (2014) found that it bolstered participants' abilities and desires to advocate for marginalized students.

Despite its transformative potential, studies show that it can be difficult to engage education students in critical reflection, to structure critical reflection opportunities that learners find compelling, or even to convince learners that critical reflection is an important undertaking. For example, based on their analysis of teacher education students' reactions to a critical-reflection-based assignment, Frazier and Eick (2015) found that about half reported not seeing the value of the assignment. In her study of the impact of a teacher education program incorporating a critical reflection component, Liu (2017) learned that students found the component compelling only if it was connected to practical teaching applications and were more reluctant about reflection focused more on ideological shifts.

Studies examining the use and impact of reflection in individual courses or programs abound (e.g., Frazier & Eick, 2015; Liu, 2017). To our knowledge, no previous study has more broadly examined what distinguishes critical reflection from other types of reflection through an analysis of reflection activities used in MSJTE courses. Similarly, although scholars have characterized what constitutes critical reflection, no previous study has broadly mapped other forms of reflection incorporated into MSJTE courses to more clearly delineate various reflection approaches. This study offers the beginnings of this examination.

## Method

We used critical content analysis to (a) detail the nature of critical reflection as incorporated into MSJTE course assignments—starting to capture a broader picture of what makes critical reflection “critical” than is possible by studying a single course or program, and (b) delineate and describe the nature of other reflection approaches. According to Short (2017), critical content analysis “involves bringing a critical lens to an analysis of a text or group of texts” (p. 6). In this study, the texts were assignment descriptions from MSJTE courses. The strength of critical content analysis is its emphasis on exploring how sociopolitical framing is encoded in texts. As such, it requires multiple deep readings with power and justice in mind. In this sense, it empowered us to examine assignment descriptions deeply in search of both subtle and not-so-subtle cues about the nature of the reflection they were meant to facilitate.

## Data Collection

The data, assignment descriptions from MSJTE courses, were drawn from a sample of syllabi gathered through snowball sampling between spring 2015 and fall 2017. We crafted emails and social media posts inviting people to share their syllabi and other course materials for a project examining the content of MSJTE courses and distributed them to forums used by people who teach MSJTE courses. These included forums hosted by the National Association for Multicultural Education, the Multicultural and Multiethnic Education Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, and EdChange. The posts included requests that people forward them to colleagues who might be interested in submitting their materials.

Mirroring the data collection process for Gorski's (2009b) previous analysis of MSJTE syllabi, the request clarified three criteria for inclusion in the sample. First, the course's *central focus* had to be multicultural education, social justice education, or a directly related topic (i.e., educational equity, educational diversity, and inclusion). Syllabi from methods or foundation courses with a partial focus on, for example, critical theory were not eligible. Second, the course had to be offered in an education degree or licensure program within the past 2 years. Finally, each syllabus had to be submitted by the course instructor with explicit permission to use it in the study. A total of 60 syllabi were collected.

As stated earlier, we decided in this study to focus our analysis on reflection assignments: assignments explicitly framed to elicit student reflection. Reflection can take many forms in MSJTE courses, from formal assignments to reading discussions. Focusing in this study on course assignments allowed us a measure of convenience, especially in the sense that we did not have the resources to attend dozens of MSJTE courses around the country to analyze the full scope of reflection incorporated into them. But it also allowed us to collect and examine a fairly large sample of like texts—all from assignment descriptions—which helped to facilitate our comparative analysis. In this sense, it is important to understand, again, that the purpose of analyzing these assignments was not to assess entire courses' criticality but rather to map the nature of various forms of reflection represented in a broad nationwide sample of assignment descriptions.

To identify which assignment descriptions to analyze, both researchers examined the syllabi to identify each reflection assignment incorporated within them. Drawing on conceptualizations from Dewey (1933), Hatton and Smith (1995), and Schön (1983), “reflection” assignments were defined as those that required purposeful considerations of learners' beliefs and actions. After separate processes of identifying assignments that we believed fit this description, we met to discuss our lists until we reached consensus on which assignments should be included in the sample. The final sample included 43 assignments drawn from 37 syllabi.

Of these 37 syllabi, 15 (40.5%) were from undergraduate courses, 20 (54.1%) from graduate courses, and two (5.4%) from courses enrolling both. Twenty-four (64.9%) were from public institutions and 13 (35.1%) from private institutions. Based on the nine regional divisions used by the U.S. Census Bureau, five (13.5%) came from New England, five (13.5%) from the Mid-Atlantic, four (10.8%) from East North Central, two (5.4%) from West North Central, 10 (27.0%) from South Atlantic, one (2.7%) from East South Central, three (8.1%) from West South Central, five (13.5%) from Mountain, and two (5.4%) from Pacific.

### Data Analysis

We examined the 43 reflection assignment descriptions to identify those that encouraged critical reflection as described in existing scholarship. In preparation, using conceptualizations in existing scholarship, we identified the types of language cues and reflective tasks often associated with critical reflection, distinguishing it from other types of reflection. Language cues included terms such as “equity,” “privilege,” “justice,” “oppression,” and “power” (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Garneau, 2016; Liu, 2015; Morley, 2008). Reflective tasks included connecting personal values to participation in anti-oppressive social change (Ross, 2015; Ryan & Ryan, 2013), examining one’s positionality related to oppression and justice (Foucault, 1982; Garneau, 2016), and challenging one’s compliance with dominant educational approaches (Fook, 2004; Morgan, 2017). In the spirit of critical content analysis, digging beneath the language surface, we also looked for more implicit cues related to how assignments were framed. As described in more detail below, for example, we found that many of the assignment descriptions included subtle framing that provided students an opportunity to avoid analyses of power and privilege, such as by using vague “culture” language scholars have argued obscures racism and other oppressions (Ladson-Billings, 2006; St Denis, 2011). Assignments that contained critical cues and that avoided obscuring power and oppression were coded as “critical reflection assignments.”

Some assignment descriptions included some elements consistent with critical reflection and others that were not. In these cases, because the assignments required critical reflection even if they also required other kinds of reflection, we counted them as critical reflection assignments. We initially examined the assignments separately. Then, we read through them together, discussing whether we believed they met the criteria for critical reflection until we reached consensus.

These assignments were examined to capture the nature of critical reflection incorporated across the sample of course assignments. Embracing Short’s (2017) description of critical content analysis, our approach involved identifying the essence of each text through multiple readings, adding new layers of notes during each examination. Also following Short’s (2017) advice, we then applied what we deemed to be

useful theoretical frameworks to help us make deeper sense of the texts. These included critical reflection and critical multicultural education. Through multiple layers of this process we were able to describe the nature of critical reflection as incorporated into the assignments.

During this analysis process, a second analytical process emerged somewhat organically. Informed by Jenks et al.’s (2001) theorization of critical, liberal, and conservative MSJTE and Gorski’s (2009b) expansion of their typology to five MSJTE approaches, we began organizing non-critical reflection assignment descriptions into “conservative” and “liberal” assignment description categories.

Once we had identified and analyzed the critical reflection assignments, we returned to those that did not meet the “critical” criteria, again completing several layers of analyzing and note-taking. This led, first, to descriptions of what we called conservative, liberal, and critical reflection assignments. Then, after additional layers of reading, analyzing, and note-taking, it led to the beginnings of a proposed framework differentiating five types of reflection assignments in MSJTE syllabi. These included one conservative and two liberal types along with two critical types, described in more detail below.

### Results

The original purpose of this study was to characterize the nature of critical reflection assignments incorporated into MSJTE courses. Below we share findings from an analysis of 43 assignments with this purpose in mind. Following those findings, we share the typology of approaches to reflection in MSJTE course assignments that emerged from our second analysis process.

#### *The Rate and Nature of Critical Reflection Assignments*

Initial analysis of 43 reflection assignments revealed that 17 (39.5%) could be characterized as encouraging critical reflection. These assignments encouraged reflection consistent with the objectives of critical reflection as described in existing scholarship (Cranton, 2013; Liu, 2015). Conversely, 26 (60.5%) assignments, although requiring some level of reflection, did not incorporate these objectives. They were reflection assignments, but not *critical* reflection assignments. It is important to note that this does not mean the courses did not incorporate critical reflection in other ways—through in-class exercises, for instance. In the context of this study, these percentages are not meant to be a judgment on individual courses or even individual assignments, but rather a description of the sample of reflective assignments with which we were working.

The 17 critical reflection assignments prompted students, not just to reflect on their attitudes, beliefs, and values but also to interrogate their attitudes, beliefs, and values in their

roles creating just schools and school systems. Our analysis through the lens of existing conceptualizations of critical reflection revealed that these assignments shared two characteristics: (a) they challenged students to consider their perceptions and ideologies, not just in terms of diversity awareness or cultural competence but also in terms of privilege, oppression, and justice (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Cranton, 2013), and (b) they challenged students to reflect on their roles and preparedness as advocates for justice in schools (Canada-Phillips, 2014). These characteristics are discussed in more detail below.

It is important to acknowledge, first, that many of these assignments combined elements consistent with conservative or liberal MSJTE with elements that revealed a critical reflection intention. For example, in one assignment students were asked to “share your cultural, social, and educational experiences that you have encountered in your life.” This aspect of the assignment, although demanding a useful reflection task, does not capture components of critical reflection. It does not require students to reflect on their experiences through an analysis of their positionalities related to power (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Garneau, 2016) or to consider how their experiences inform their abilities to recognize injustice (Liu, 2015; Morley, 2008). However, a second part of the assignment requires students to connect their experiences with the “purpose of schooling” and the impact of schooling on “the current social order,” more aligned with a critical approach. Assignments that included components indicative of critical reflection were coded as “critical reflection assignments” even when they contained elements not consistent with critical reflection.

*Beyond diversity awareness.* The critical reflection assignments reached beyond conservative or liberal MSJTE objectives such as strengthening multicultural awareness. The assignment descriptions presumed educators were by default advocates for educational justice. As a result, the assignments were designed to strengthen students’ social justice lenses beyond diversity appreciation and cultural competence (Canada-Phillips, 2014; Smith, 2011).

Capturing the spirit of many of these assignments, one challenged students to strengthen their “social justice competencies” by articulating their “conception of what it means to teach for social justice.” Many pushed students to reflect, in the language of another assignment, “beyond cultural awareness,” making explicit the goal of striving for a more critical orientation. Students were asked not just to reflect on their own biases but also, as in one assignment, to interrogate those biases through a more “critical and social justice” teaching approach. This more critical approach was characterized by assignment requirements that asked students, in the language of another assignment, to “confront difficult questions about privilege” in their lives. In sum, reflecting existing conceptualizations of critical reflection, the assignments encouraged students to name, assess, and reflect internally on their lenses,

privileges, and teaching values from a social justice standpoint that reached beyond the diversity awareness or cultural competence framing that dominated the other assignments in our sample. To be clear, again, we were looking not for the *absence* of liberal MSJTE approaches—appreciating diversity, identifying personal biases, and other important building blocks—but rather for the *presence* of critical MSJTE approaches.

*Advocates for educational justice.* Second, the assignments challenged students to connect internal reflections on their lenses, privileges, and values to systems of oppression operating in schools. Harkening to the scholarship on equity literacy (Gorski, 2016; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), the assignments were designed not only to elicit reflection on students’ individual privileges or attitudes but also to elicit reflection on how students’ positionalities supported or hindered their abilities to be agents of justice in schools. They were designed both to help students recognize their social justice responsibilities and to examine the extent of their will and abilities to enact those responsibilities. The question was not whether students had anti-oppression responsibilities, but whether and how students embraced them.

For example, one assignment required students to describe incidents of discrimination in school, “their roles” in the discrimination, and their decisions whether or not to be “interrupters” of injustice. Explicitly demonstrating how internal values and privilege are connected to positionality, another assignment challenged students to reflect on how their “experiences [and] beliefs connect” and how these experiences and beliefs position them to be “stronger teacher[s] for equity.” Some assignments specifically required students to address how racism, economic justice, sexism, and other forms of oppression operate in schools. Others left the precise focus open to student choice.

### *A Typology of Reflection Assignment Approaches in MSJTE Courses*

As we analyzed the assignments, attempting to distinguish “critical” reflection assignments from other reflection assignments, a new typology of reflection assignment approaches began to emerge. Curious about the nature of the assignments we coded as not capturing a critical approach, we engaged in several rounds of analysis, leading to the identification of five approaches aligning roughly with Jenks et al.’s (2001) conservative, liberal, and critical MSJTE and Gorski’s (2009b) expansion of those categories into five MSJTE approaches. These approaches are summarized in Table 1 and described below.

We want to clarify first that we entered this process understanding that, excepting conservative approaches based around assimilation, there is value in a wide variety of reflection approaches. Liberal MSJTE goals of exploring personal bias and building cultural competence are important. The

**Table I.** Typology of Approaches to Reflection in Multicultural and Social Justice Teacher Education.

	Approach	Purpose	Characteristics
Conservative	I. Amorphous “cultural” reflection	To reflect broadly on one’s understandings of “other” cultures, usually in an essentializing way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vague focus on “culture”</li> <li>• Avoidance of focus on racism, heterosexism, or other justice concerns</li> <li>• Danger of confirming stereotypes of “the other”</li> </ul>
Liberal	II. Personal identity reflection	To reflect on one’s personal identities without grappling with the implications of difference or power or how identities influence one’s worldviews or understandings of justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consideration of role of personal identity in life and school experiences</li> <li>• Focus on “diversity” but not on justice or oppression</li> <li>• Lack of connection between identities and their impact on teaching practice</li> </ul>
	III. Cultural competence reflection	To reflect on one’s teaching practice with “diverse learners” in light of one’s identities and life experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural competence framing related to teaching “diverse learners”</li> <li>• Absence of reflection on beliefs or actions related to oppression against or advocacy for marginalized students</li> </ul>
Critical	IV. Equitable and just school reflection	To reflect on one’s preparedness and willingness to be an agent of social justice change in a school context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit examination of positionalities and responsibilities related to oppression and liberation in schools</li> <li>• Presumption of educator as a social justice change agent</li> </ul>
	V. Social transformation reflection	To reflect on one’s preparedness and willingness to be an agent of social justice change in and out of school contexts and to reflect on the areas of continued growth one needs to be an agent of social justice change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection between oppression and anti-oppression in schools and outside schools</li> <li>• Incorporation of forward-leaning reflection related to continued needs for development as social justice advocates</li> </ul>

hope, again, is not for the absence of liberal approaches, but rather for the presence of critical approaches. We discuss this in more detail later.

*Approach I: Amorphous “cultural” reflections (conservative).* Six (14%) of the assignments were consistent with conservative multiculturalism (Jenks et al., 2001). We referred to them as *amorphous “cultural” reflections* due to their tendency to encourage students to stereotype or essentialize their own and others’ experiences. These assignments shared two characteristics. First, they focused vaguely on “culture,” conflating it with, or avoiding naming, race, gender identity, and other identifiers around which some people are marginalized. Second, they commonly used *othering* language, implicitly normalizing privileged-identity groups.

MSJTE and educational justice scholars have long been wary of vague conceptualizations of “culture” and how they are used to sidestep considerations of oppression (Ladson-Billings, 2006; St Denis, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2006) warned of what she called the *poverty of culture* wherein “culture” becomes a simplistic explanation for every educational phenomenon. These assignments illustrated her concern. They were designed around vague conceptualizations of culture while not encouraging students to reflect upon the

conditions—racism, heterosexism, other injustices—MSJTE courses should prepare educators to disrupt.

For example, several required students to name cultural artifacts or behaviors as a means to reflect on their “cultural” identities. Certainly, culture can be one important aspect of identity, but these assignments framed culture in particularly surface-level ways while never bridging catch-all “cultural” framings to identities or conditions around which marginalization happens. Reflective prompts included sharing artifacts “indicative of [their] culture,” describing their “cultural celebrations or traditions,” and producing a “cultural identity pie chart.” One assignment description suggested, “a person may bring a cross to symbol[ize] the Christian faith or a Star of David, showing Judaism,” referring to these as cultural symbols, but not mentioning Christian privilege, Islamophobia, or other religion- or faith-based justice concerns. Again, this does not mean that students were not engaged around these issues in other aspects of the course but that this particular assignment demonstrates what we called a conservative approach to reflection.

In another common feature, several of the assignment descriptions featured *othering* language. One asked students to reflect on their experiences with people who are “culturally different” from themselves. Another asked them to

watch a movie from a cultural perspective different from their own. The gist of many assignments was to learn about a group of people who were “culturally different,” often by observing or participating in an activity located outside their cultural contexts. For example, one required students to participate in an activity based in a context where they were a “cultural novice.” Overall, these assignments never bridged vague cultural reflections to power and justice—to racism, transphobia, ableism, or other oppressions.

Research is mixed on the effects of these “cultural tourism” activities. Although they may provide seeds of insight into how some students who are marginalized might experience education, they have been criticized, especially in the critical education sphere, for masking oppression while focusing on simple “cultural” transactions (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). They risk further marking the cultural “other” or essentializing identity groups (Gorski, 2016). Also, by focusing on *cultural* differences they may mask power and privilege differences (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

*Approach II: Personal identity reflections (liberal 1).* Twenty (47%) of the assignments were consistent with Jenks et al.’s (2001) conceptualizations of liberal MSJTE. These assignments pushed learners beyond reflecting on cultural identities. They were framed to encourage learners to examine their beliefs and values regarding race, class, and other dimensions of identity. They did not encourage students to consider their preparedness to be advocates for educational justice—a characteristic consistent with critical reflection (Liu, 2015; Ryan & Ryan, 2013). But they might have served as a bridge to that deeper reflection, perhaps incorporated into the courses in other ways.

A closer examination of these assignments revealed patterns that enabled us to divide them into two more specific subcategories, the first of which, comprising eight (18%) assignments, we called *personal identity reflections*. These assignments required students to reflect on their identities and beliefs regarding various identity dimensions. They prompted students to explore their understandings of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” through their own identity lenses, examine how their identities shaped their experiences as students, and consider how their identities informed their behaviors and attitudes.

Many asked students to reflect on their school experiences. For example, one prompted students to

research and reflect on your own cultural identity—cultural experiences which help to make you who you are such as your family, social class, race, ethnicity, language, ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and any other cultural constructs that influenced your schooling experiences.

Another challenged students to reflect on the relationship between schooling and identity formation, prompting them to consider “the ways in which identity markers informed

your schooling experiences and your schooling experiences informed your identity.” In another, students were asked to connect prior school experiences with their “understanding of cultural and individual diversity in schools.” They were encouraged to consider, in the words of another assignment, how they “became socialized to view the world” through their identity lenses and how their lenses informed their school experiences.

Many also focused on students’ understandings of difference as related to their own identities. They were prompted to reflect on factors that influenced their identities, such as ethnicity, race, gender, class, language, geographic location, and religion. In one assignment, students were asked to “explore when you first became aware of your race, or racial/ethnic and class identity” and then respond to the question, “[H]ow do these experiences shape your behavior now?”

These assignments shared the objective of encouraging students to consider how past experiences related to identity shaped how they think and act. They did not reflect the characteristics of critical reflection in that they did not ask students to consider how these experiences might inform their teaching or shape their presumptions about students whose identities are different from their own or require them to grapple with the *implications* of difference through a consideration of power, privilege, and oppression (Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Rosen et al., 2017). Assignment goals were useful from a diversity awareness perspective. They were different from critical reflection assignments in that they may not prepare students, particularly privileged-identity students, to connect past experiences with present positionalities or to connect those positionalities with their roles as educators.

*Approach III: Cultural competence reflections (liberal 2).* Twelve (28% of the overall sample) of the liberal-MSJTE-oriented assignments, which we called *cultural competence reflections*, differed from personal identity reflections in two ways. First, although they similarly prompted students to reflect on past experiences that shaped their understandings of difference, they also challenged students to consider their present or future teaching practice in light of those experiences. Second, the language used in the assignment descriptions harken to common conceptualizations of cultural competence. As captured in one assignment description, students were to develop “their ability to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners.” What distinguished this from a critical approach is that they were asked to do so in the context of the assignment without an explicit focus on power and oppression, without consideration for how racism, transphobia, or other oppressions operate in their classrooms or how they might contribute to these oppressions.

One assignment asked students to “examine [their] attitudes, beliefs, and biases as related to cultural knowledge and skills needed to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services.” Others incorporated similar cultural competence

framing. Notably, this sort of framing has been problematized by some critical multicultural and social justice education scholars as a detour around addressing inequity (Gorski, 2019a; Kumagai & Lyson, 2009). They referred, for instance, to “multicultural approaches to teaching” and teaching in a “multicultural way” but did not encourage students to reflect on inequity and oppression. They tended to frame the teacher’s role as building marginalized students’ capacities to, in the language of one assignment description, “utilize their linguistic and cultural backgrounds to accelerate learning.”

Several assignments we included in the cultural competence reflections category emphasized the implications of personal beliefs, cultural identities, and schooling experiences for educators’ abilities to teach “diverse” or “multicultural” students. This kind of evasive language, “diverse students,” is emblematic of common criticisms of “multicultural competence” from a critical MSJTE point of view—especially how it obscures power and oppression (Gorski, 2016).

Although the assignments did encourage meaningful reflection opportunities, they differed from critical reflection in that they did not challenge educators to reflect on their beliefs about, or actions to either repress or advocate for the rights of, students of color, transgender students, or students marginalized in other ways. For example, one assignment prompted students to reflect on “how your life experiences, perceptions, and education have led to your current ideas about working with diverse student populations.” It is a compelling reflection prompt that could bridge students to critical reflection. But by itself it provides insight into what distinguishes liberal reflection from critical reflection and the limitations of the former in the absence of the latter.

*Approach IV: Equitable and just school reflections (critical 1).* As mentioned earlier, 17 (39%) of the assignments were framed in ways consistent with existing conceptualizations of critical reflection. We distinguished two critical approaches, calling the first one *equitable and just school reflections*. It included 13 (30%) of the analyzed assignments.

These assignments embody elements of critical reflection described earlier. To review, they challenged learners to reach beyond diversity awareness and explorations of their attitudes and biases. They pushed learners to examine their preparedness to be agents of change for educational justice. They transcended vague cultural framing and explicitly encouraged students to examine their participation in, and role in eliminating, injustice. Rather than “cultural identity,” the focus was on what it means to “interrupt. . . discrimination”, on “the purpose of schooling” in relation to “the current social order,” and on the implications of educators’ “social locations” relative to their students. These are elements of critical reflection (Bennet et al., 2016).

*Approach V: Social transformation reflections (critical 2).* Four (9%) of the assignments contained elements distinguishing them from equitable and just school reflections in two ways.

First, whereas the latter encouraged students to reflect on their roles as change agents by examining their positionalities and injustice complicities in schools, *social transformation reflections* pushed students to connect school justice concerns to bigger societal justice concerns. For example, one required students to examine their “attitudes and beliefs about privilege and marginalization” as they relate not only to schools but also to their larger “view of the world.” Another challenged them to consider their positionalities related to the nexus of education systems and larger systems of power, emphasizing that students should demonstrate understandings of the “complexities of [the] relationships” between these systems. In another, students were asked to reflect in ways that positioned them as agents of social justice in and out of schools. “For whom will you advocate?” it prodded.

Second, all four of the assignments challenged students to name the justice issues they did not understand adequately—the issues around which they needed growth. They were asked not only to consider their present understandings, commitments, and positionalities but also to describe their intentions for continued development. One required learners to examine their “current capacity as a race- and socioeconomic-class-conscious multicultural educator” and the “kinds of knowledge bases” they “still need to develop” in these areas. Another challenged students to consider the “reciprocal relationships” between power and education while also “looking forward to reflecting on things” they “still don’t understand” about these relationships. In this way, these assignments helped provide a path forward, not just for equitable practice but also for critical reflection.

Notably, this future-leaning, ongoing gap-exploring element appears unaccounted for in previous critical reflection research. Existing conceptualizations emphasize in-the-moment reflections, often informed by previous experiences and socializations, on present levels of justice consciousness and complicity (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Ross, 2015). They do not incorporate or emphasize the importance of identifying ongoing needs for growth as social justice thinkers or actors. Scholars often have encouraged critical reflection to help educators position themselves as agents of future social justice change (Liu, 2015; Smith, 2011), but not necessarily as people who commit to continued social justice growth following facilitated reflection activities. Additional research could examine the impact of this particular element, which we found in only four of the assignments.

## Discussion

Scholars of social justice education and educational equity generally agree on the importance of critical reflection (Grant & Sleeter, 2010; Marshall, 2015; Nieto, 2006). Critical reflection enhances not only our abilities to explore our own experiences and ideologies but also our abilities to understand our positionalities relative to injustice and responsibilities to

eliminate injustice (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Garneau, 2016; Liu, 2015). From the critical reflection view, encouraging educators to reflect only on the existence of cultural difference and the meanings of cultural artifacts is insufficient. From this perspective, starting with an understanding that MSJTE should prepare educators to enact justice in and out of schools (Au, 2017; Sleeter, 1996), most of the reflection assignments were better characterized as what in MSJTE parlance might be called *conservative* or *liberal* reflection (Jenks et al., 2001).

This finding does not necessarily mean that the courses in which these assignments were used lacked critical reflection. We cannot assume that graded assignments represent the full scope of learning in any course. Nor does it mean that more “liberal” reflection opportunities serve no purpose. The point is not to discount any particular assignment or course, but rather to consider patterns across reflection assignments and perhaps, in doing so, to offer an opportunity for teacher educators to assess the purposes and potentials of their full range of reflection activities. Again, the point, in our view, is not to advocate for a diminished presence of non-critical reflection, but rather for a greater presence of critical reflection.

Research on critical reflection in teacher education shows that its cultivation requires structured, purposeful practice (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). Most learners need carefully crafted prompts prodding them into deep reflection about power and oppression, especially around forms of injustice associated with their privileged identities; for most students, this does not come easily (Campbell & Baikie, 2013; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). Studies have shown that, left to their own devices with reflection activities that do not explicitly provide prompts eliciting critical reflection, most students will adopt a less critical approach. They might reflect on technical aspects of classroom practice, but not on positionality, oppression, or privilege (Liu, 2017). For example, Ulusoy (2016), who analyzed more than 2,000 written reflections composed by teacher education students during field experiences, found that less than 4% of them demonstrated critical reflection.

In fact, mirroring studies in MSJTE (e.g., Gorski, 2009b; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011), absent critical intentionality, reflection-based learning experiences can reify existing biases and ideologies (Blasco, 2012). Especially in the case of some of the assignments reflecting *conservative* MSJTE values—for example, encouraging essentialized thinking—it could be the case that some of these assignments risk reifying troubling ideologies regardless of what else is happening in their MSJTE courses. It is our hope that by mapping approaches to reflection in MSJTE courses, we have provided a tool for MSJTE faculty to do their own critical reflection on the nature of reflection they are using.

Encouraging hope, research has shown that MSJTE instructors generally have critical orientations, but face challenges that make it difficult to operationalize those orientations in MSJTE courses. These include student resistance

and the threat of poor course evaluation scores, resistance from institutional power brokers, and teacher-activist burn-out from contending with resistance (Liu & Milman, 2014; Rodriguez, 2009)—stressors that are often elevated for faculty of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) faculty, and others forced to withstand intensified scrutiny by students and colleagues, especially if they adopt a critical teaching approach (Gorski, 2019b; Marshall, 2015). On top of these barriers, critical reflection scholars have identified conditions that can make teaching critical reflection challenging, including some that mirror bigger challenges with which MSJTE instructors contend. For example, students may resist engaging in critical reflection because it could force them to examine or reveal unpleasant aspects of themselves. Given these challenges, rather than presuming solely conservative or liberal intentions among MSJTE instructors, we might consider what supports could make them more willing to incorporate critical approaches.

In this spirit, the typology of reflection assignment approaches that constitutes the second outcome of this study should not be read as prescriptive. It is not meant as a judgment on instructors or courses or a call to eliminate any reflection that cannot be characterized as critical reflection. We offer the typology as a reflective tool to examine the full range of ways teacher educators incorporate reflection into courses and other forms of teacher education. Although the typology was built from an analysis of course assignments, we believe it offers at least the beginnings of a framework that could be just as relevant to other sorts of learning activities.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the typology is the distinction of a “critical” approach not explicitly accounted for in existing critical reflection scholarship. The first of the two critical approaches, equitable and just school reflections, captured the essence of existing conceptualizations of critical reflection (Bennet et al., 2016; Ryan & Ryan, 2013). The second, social transformation reflections, required students to examine how their positionalities and inequity complicities relate to power and oppression in the larger society. They also challenged students toward a future-leaning critical reflection, asking them to name gaps in their understandings—the positionalities and complicities around which they most need continuing reflection. In doing so, they potentially position educators as lifelong critical learners.

## Conclusion

It is our hope that this study and the typology will help teacher educators reflect on the ways they incorporate reflection into their courses and other work. Do they do so in ways that demonstrate high expectations for what current and future teachers are capable of doing when it comes to justice? How can we continue to push educators toward deeper and more sophisticated social justice learning through critical reflection?

Future research could look more broadly across MSJTE courses to examine whether critical reflection is incorporated into other aspects of MSJTE courses or even inservice professional learning. Other methodological means such as interviews or class observations could be used. Applying the typology developed through this study, researchers also might compare outcomes for current and future educators exposed to various forms of reflection or examine ways liberal reflection opportunities can be used to bridge students to more critical reflection approaches.

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### ORCID iD

Paul C. Gorski  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9082-8885>

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### Author Biographies

**Paul C. Gorski** is the founder of the Equity Literacy Institute and EdChange, where he supports schools and school districts in their efforts to strengthen their equity and justice efforts.

**Kelly Dalton** is the founding director of the Saints' Center for Service at Marymount University, where she coordinates service projects for students across campus.