

What Does Teaching for Social Justice Mean to Teacher Candidates?

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Abstract

To better prepare teacher candidates to teach for social justice, teacher educators need to know students' understandings of social justice embedded in their personal histories and past and current learning experiences. Using participatory action research, this study examines how 6 early childhood (grades pre-K–3) teacher candidates understood and changed, or did not change their understandings of teaching for social justice. Using qualitative methods, this research aims to understand the complexities of interactions between the participants' identity and their conceptualization of teaching for social justice within a teacher education program. The results of this study provide early childhood teacher educators with insights and tools for encouraging social justice teaching.

In recent years, there has been a strong emphasis on teaching for social justice in teacher education programs, and teacher educators have made efforts to prepare teacher candidates for working successfully with diverse learners. However, there has not been progress in successfully preparing teachers to work effectively with diverse learners (NCES, 2002). Some programs are able to influence teacher candidates' perceptions and teaching practices (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001; Peterson, et al., 2000), while others have not (Causey, Thomas & Armento, 2000).

One aspect of the challenge of preparing teacher candidates relates to the future teachers themselves. The demographic gap between teachers and students is quite large and will likely continue to increase (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Of course, this demographic gap itself is not the problem. The problem is that the majority of white, middle-class teacher candidates who enter teacher education programs have limited understandings about differences related to culture, class, and race. Thus, they have few skills to work with diverse learners (Finney & Orr, 1995; Grant, 1993) and often harbor resistant attitudes about working with them (Haberman, 1991; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996).

The academic achievement gap among different racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic status groups of students is exacerbated by inequitable educational opportunities and resources, access to highly qualified teachers, and access to proper pedagogy and pedagogical resources (Lalas, 2007). Such a demographic imperative (Banks, 1995; Dilworth, 1992) and demographic divide (Gay, 2000) calls for more equitable education—that is, preparing future teachers to teach for social justice.

To better prepare teacher candidates to teach for social justice, teacher educators need to know their students' understandings of social justice embedded in their personal histories and past and current learning experiences. This article describes how six early childhood teacher candidates understood and changed, or did not change, and how their understandings of teaching for social justice connected with their past and current experiences.

Reading the Literature on Social Justice

Since 9/11, we often hear teachers repeating the patriotic phrase "... indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." What does that mean to children, teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators? And do people have a shared conception of social justice? Many people use the terms *justice* or *teaching for social justice*, but they may not be explicitly aware of what these phrases mean. They often confuse or interchangeably use *teaching for social justice* with *multicultural education*, *diversity*, *equity*, and so forth.

There are many theories about social justice from different fields—the hard sciences, psychology, medicine, and architecture (Rizvi & Christensen, 1996). Some of these theories focus on different aspects of social justice, such as rules, justice, norms, and attitudes; and others consider behaviors at different levels, such as individual, group, and nation (Moore, 2003). *Social justice* is often defined as both a product and process (Bell, 1997). That is, we need to understand *what* social justice would look like when we have attained these goals (product), as well as *how* to achieve the goals of social justice (process). It is my belief that product and process must work reciprocally—goals influence process, and vice versa.

Regarding the product of social justice, scholars differ. According to Bell (1997), "social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure" (p. 1). Some experts define teaching for social justice as having beliefs with an emphasis on ethical values, care, and respect (Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Kohl (2001) argues that to create schools that are socially just, one must advocate for moral responsibility. Young (1993) explains that everyone in a just society should be able to "develop and exercise her or his intellectual, social, emotional, and expressive capacities" (p. 123). Greene (1998) explains that in a just society everyone affected by a decision should have a part in making the decision. Likewise, hooks (1994) expresses that a fundamental goal of transformative pedagogy is creating a democratic classroom setting where everyone is committed to contribute.

There are multiple and diverse methods of teaching for social justice. When the term *social justice* is applied to classroom contexts that are multidimensional and unpredictable, the practice of teaching for social justice becomes complex. Teachers encounter contested values, beliefs, and behaviors of their students that they may or may not recognize and accept.

To become a teacher for social justice, teachers need to understand who they are and their views on the sources of inequities and privileges (Darling-Hammond, 2005). By knowing their views, teachers should be able to recognize and accept differences of their students and families. Hooks (1994) warns that one way of knowing and thinking shouldn't be replaced with another. That is, multiple ways of knowing and thinking should be recognized and encouraged. However, she adds that the process of making a classroom more inclusive creates chaos and confusion, so we must be both patient and attentive (p. 32).

Teacher candidates also need to develop teaching approaches that are social justice oriented. These might include integrating students' diverse cultures into curriculum, creating learning environments to reduce prejudice and oppression, developing equitable pedagogy for all students, incorporating multiple knowledge construction processes, and getting involved in empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 2008).

Only a few studies have been conducted on teacher candidates' conceptualization of teaching for social justice. Causey et al. (2000) found that many teacher candidates believed in an "absolute democracy" where majority rules but individual rights are dismissed, and/or in "attitudes of naïve

egalitarianism,” which means that everyone should have equal access to resources and equal treatment (p. 33–34).

According to Cornbleth (2008), prospective teachers view norms and values that are different from mainstream values as a problem. In other words, these different norms and values cause conflict and problems, rather than serve as resources for learning. From her review of research, Sleeter (2001) showed that prospective teachers use colorblindness to cope with their fears and ignorance about how to deal with racial differences. Limited knowledge, deep-rooted beliefs, and attitudes about diversity and justice are difficult to change in the short period of time they are in the teacher education programs (Sleeter, 1988). To help teacher educators work more productively with teacher candidates, we need further research on teacher candidates’ conceptions of teaching for social justice.

This paper argues that teacher candidates’ conceptualization of teaching for social justice is necessarily contextualized. If teacher educators assume that teacher candidates’ understandings are socially, historically, and politically constructed, and will also influence and be influenced by their interactions within university and school contexts, then they will need to build on what preservice teachers bring to the program (Cochran-Smith, 2004). There is no one best way to understand and prepare teacher candidates for socially just teaching; however, to have a knowledge base to guide teacher education practices, we need to know more about how teacher candidate participants construct their understandings of teaching for social justice. Case study research is one way to develop such a knowledge base.

The Context

This case study was situated within the context of a 5-quarter M.Ed. teacher licensure program in a Midwest university. There were 2 early childhood cohorts (pre-K–grade 3), with 31 teacher candidates in each group. The population of the M.Ed. program was similar to teacher populations nationally—White, young females coming from the same state where they grew up. Given the discrepancy between student and teacher populations in many schools, the faculty of the methods courses in the M.Ed. program made a concerted effort throughout the program to prepare teacher candidates to teach diverse learners and to teach for social justice. In addition, the method courses also incorporated issues of diversity and equity.

Observation verified that all the methods course instructors were committed to including these issues. There were also focused experiences for the teacher candidates. For example, teacher candidates were required to take either a one-week intensive course on diversity and equity or a two-quarter community service learning project at a primarily African American church. Also, for their final project for graduation, teacher candidates completed a capstone portfolio that required descriptions of their learning about diversities.

Participants also had yearlong field placements assigned to one of the elementary schools in urban and suburban areas. Their prior pre-kindergarten placement for one full quarter provided teaching experiences different from their elementary school placement.

Ten teaching associates who were full-time graduate associates (GAs) supervised 6 teacher candidates each in preschool and elementary school placements throughout the year. The GAs, and other graduate students interested in teacher education, met every 2 weeks throughout the school year to talk about ideas, suggestions, and concerns. For class, they also read and discussed issues related to teacher education and multicultural education. GAs attended the teacher candidate seminar once a week for 3 quarters, as well as professional development meetings to work with inservice teachers.

The primary purposeful selection (Patton, 1990) of sites and participants was a strategy of convenience. I chose the M.Ed. program in my university because I was already assigned to work as a supervisor, and it gave me easy access and a useful setting for my research and professional growth (Glesne, 1999). However, as an international minority student, doing my research with American graduate certification students and in American classrooms made my work challenging.

Using the pool of teacher candidates in the program, I selected 6 participants from the cohort, and the program supervisors agreed that I could be their supervisor. The teacher candidates agreed to participate. I wanted participants who were teaching in different school settings. I selected 3 who were student teaching in a suburban elementary school and had had earlier urban pre-kindergarten placements.

I also selected 3 who were in urban school placements and had had suburban pre-kindergarten placements. I wanted cases that would offer a range of differences and similarities while holding steady two types of contrasting school placements—urban and suburban. As I began the study, I assumed that the sociocultural contexts of the participants would create different dynamics and learning influenced by their prior experiences, the schools in which they would have their field experiences, and the university program.

Research Method

In this research, I presumed that teaching, especially teaching for social justice, is socially, culturally, and politically constructed; complex and changing; and that multiple mental constructions exist that are specific and influenced by the participants' context (Guba, 1990). This ontological and epistemological stance supported my use of a qualitative, interpretive approach, which uses a researcher's firsthand knowledge of the social context to interpret how participants create meaning (Burgess, 1985).

The multiple perspectives of the teacher candidate participants' stories were used to describe the complexities and multiplicities of their understandings about teaching for social justice. Using participatory action research methods, I also aimed to support participants' teaching knowledge and practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000), as well as develop my own supervisory practices to be more socially just.

Notions of knowledge construction within a social context (Vygotsky, 1978) called my attention to the *-isms* and *oppressions* that might be involved as I tried to help the participants examine their teaching critically. If I am committed to sociocultural theory, then racism, classism, sexism, and other *-isms* that are socially and historically constructed had to be deconstructed and reconstructed through dialogue within social contexts.

My position as a university supervisor and a researcher also needed to be carefully examined. It is possible that the participants felt pressure to perform well rather than talk to me truthfully about their practice because I was in an evaluative position. I worked hard to establish close relationships and trust, but at the same time I acknowledge the influence my dual roles may have had on their willingness to talk truthfully with me. Acknowledging these theoretical and methodological issues, I tried to maintain a critically reflective perspective as I worked with the participants.

A case study approach was also used in an effort to develop in-depth understandings of each participant's learning process regarding specific events of teaching for social justice (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). For these cases, detailed information was collected and analyzed to describe specific cases that might be overlooked in studies looking for generalizable knowledge.

As a researcher and supervisor, I took advantage of all possible opportunities to listen to their stories and collect multiple data sources, including conversations during pre- and postlesson conferences, individual and group lunch meetings, semistructured interview questions, telephone and email conversations, their e-portfolio websites, and attending their methods courses. The participants' autobiographies, reflective journals, lessons, and other documents were collected, and all conversations were recorded. There were also field notes from observations and from collections of ongoing feedback on the participants' teaching that were provided by the supervisor.

Data analysis involved reading the data and identifying patterns in the participants' thinking. The cases were analyzed separately to examine uniqueness of each case, and together for comparisons. Such a process continued until the end of the participants' student teaching. Afterward, using those patterns, a coding book and a theme chart were created. The coding system helped to organize, manage, and fine-tune the themes (Anderson, & Nihlen, 1994). Only a small portion of the data analysis (Lee, 2004) related to two research questions for this paper is presented here.

The research questions included:

1. How did teacher candidates understand the goals and approaches of teaching for social justice?
2. What changes in their conceptions of teaching for social justice occurred during the year of the teacher education program?

This article describes the case study participants' personal and program experiences as well as the research questions, and it describes the changes or stability in their understandings of teaching for social justice.

Personal and Program Experiences

The assumptions we develop from our own experiences influence the way we understand the world (Schwandt, 2000). In turn, these understandings influence the ways we learn and teach. The importance of self-knowledge has gradually received increased attention in teacher education programs influenced by feminist, narrative, critical, and postmodern theories (Clandinin, 1995; Glickman, 1992; Mesmer, 1998; Middleton, 1993; Shinew, 2001).

The participants' prior and current program experiences and their constructed social identities were demonstrated in relation to their particular path to conceptualizing teaching for social justice. This research on participants' backgrounds and understandings of teaching for social justice provides helpful illustrative case studies and suggests educational implications. Table 1 provides demographic information on each of the participants and their student teaching field placements, and indicates some of the possible influences on participants.

Table 1
Demographic Population of Participants and Their Field Placements

	Courtney	Erin	Wendy	Jessica	Kathy	Hannah
Age	39	23	27	22	22	23
Race	White	Black	White	White	White	White
SES	Middle	Upper Middle	Working	Middle	Upper Middle	Middle
Degree	Art History	HDFS	HDFS	HDFS	HDFS	Special Ed.

Courtney

Courtney is a 39-year-old White female who grew up in a suburban area in Michigan where there was no racial or economical diversity. She recalled that she was bored with living in the countryside and satisfied her curiosity about the world through reading books and magazines. She said she was a good student who did well in academics and was the only one in her family who went to college.

Courtney is somewhat different from the other teacher candidates in the program in several ways, in addition to being somewhat older. After her Bachelor's degree in art history, she worked for almost 10 years in television commercials and film production, working in the art department in set decorating, set design, and prop purchasing. As a freelancer, she made good money and had quite a bit of free time, which allowed her to travel all over the world. For example, she lived with a Muslim family in Nepal for 6 months.

During the course of this study, she was pursuing both an early childhood teaching licensure and a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) certificate. She is fluent in Spanish, and she chose her student teaching field placement where there were Spanish-speaking children. Another reason for her field placement selection in an urban school was because she was interested in different groups of people and wanted to learn how to teach students from different backgrounds (Informal Conversation, October, 2003). She joined the community service learning Mt. Olivet¹ project to gain a better understanding of African American children. She also enrolled in the summer service-learning course, where she went to Chile, stayed with a family, and taught English to children in an English Immersion School.

Erin

Erin considers herself a bi-cultural person, being both a Black woman (she wanted to be identified as Black) living in America, and a citizen of Bermuda. She went to high school in the U.S. and got her Bachelor's degree, followed by the M.Ed. certification program. At the end of school year, she planned to return to Bermuda to teach in the elementary school already assigned to her.

In her opinion, her bi-cultural experiences had helped her learn to both adapt to and be tolerant of different cultural contexts. Although she briefly mentioned the difficulties of being a student of color, she felt that she had adjusted well in both cultures.

Erin requested an urban school for her field experiences because she would feel more comfortable with African Americans due to her darker skin color (Informal Conversation, September 2003). At the beginning of the program, she expressed that she felt much more comfortable in her urban elementary school field placement than her White-dominant preschool placement. However, she also experienced challenges due to the socioeconomic differences between her and the students in the elementary school, while she became more comfortable in her preschool due to enormous support from staff and families.

She explained what she learned from her field experiences with children with different socioeconomic backgrounds:

Coming from an upper-middle-class background, dealing with working class students was quite an enlightening experience. While I do have friends from the working class, my experience in working with the students in my elementary school and their families broadened my horizons and has

¹ Mt. Olivet is an African American church. One faculty person in the M.Ed. supervised a community service-learning project at the church to better prepare teacher candidates to work with diverse children.

greatly influenced my philosophical statements concerning equity and diversity. (Electronic portfolio)

Erin was well aware that there were different types of oppression and that she needed to be more conscious of her own prejudices in areas such as homosexuality and social classes. She honestly revealed that her prejudice toward homosexuality was influenced by her father:

Starting with my family, who are deeply embedded, if not enmeshed with my church family, due to my father's role as a pastor, I hold many views that continue the cycle of oppression toward the homosexual culture. Being a Christian family, we hold firm biblical beliefs that homosexuality is not at all acceptable. I recall *small* jokes my father would make about men who appeared feminine. While at the time these comments seemed harmless and simply funny, I now understand the impact these little comments have made on my own views of homosexuality. ...this view is going to be the most difficult to deal with as an educator, for I know I will meet families that involve same sex relationships. (Electronic portfolio)

Wendy

Wendy grew up in a small town of 1,200 people surrounded by fields and farms. Her family did not have a farm, but many relatives on both sides of her family were farmers. Wendy said that in high school she feared attending college, mainly because she knew little about college life and she would be the first in her family to go to college. Wendy honestly described her stereotypical beliefs toward African Americans, which had changed, and she expressed a critical view about the social influences on those beliefs.

Wendy admitted that she used to think all African Americans lived in the city and had body odor. She had had an incident that confirmed this when she visited her grandmother. They were riding on a bus, and she sat by an African American man with a strong body odor. This experience confirmed her prejudice of African Americans.

When she started attending college, she worked to support herself at one of the dining halls where most employees were African American. She remembered how uncomfortable she was working with her colleagues, because she had rarely spoken to an African American. She had some difficulty understanding Ebonics in addition to the difficulty of understanding city people's fast speech. She initially shared the negative perceptions of her White friends toward the African American students, and she witnessed a lot of name calling. However, her attitudes changed as she became more and more comfortable talking and working with African Americans in her job.

Her biggest eye-opening experience, she recalls, was when she worked as a child welfare caseworker after graduating from the college. Through working with many families from different countries with different cultural backgrounds, she became critical of her stereotypical feelings and learned from those experiences.

Wendy also expressed feeling uncomfortable working with some of her classmates in the program due to their different socioeconomic status:

Can you believe it? One of my classmates spent hundreds of dollars for her hairdo and says, "Oh, well, it is worth it," and another student has her own personal trainer helping her lose weight. If I tell this to my mom, she's not gonna believe it. It's so different. (Conversation, December 2003)

Wendy's social class background gave her a different perspective on values related to money, and her experiences with these students added to her stereotype about students from higher socioeconomic contexts.

According to Wendy (Informal Conversation, October 2003), due to her social class background, she wanted to be placed in an urban school where there were more children from low socioeconomic families. Yet, she struggled to work effectively with African American children. Her experiences through the Mt. Olivet project helped her reduce her negative stereotypes toward African American children, and her comfort level increased (Post lesson conference, April 2004).

Jessica

Jessica is a 22-year-old, middle class, White female who was raised in a small town in Ohio. She attended elementary through high school with students who had similar upbringings. Her parents were divorced when she was one year old, and her mother remarried shortly afterward. She had a close relationship with both her stepfather and her biological father and felt close to both sets of parents and her two siblings. She appreciated her mother's devotion: "My mother worked nights so she could stay at home with my siblings and me during the day" (Diversity story for a course assignment, December 2003).

Jessica recalled that she was never excited about school, but she was successful and did not mind going. She attributed her success in school to her memory; she could easily memorize time tables, spelling words, historical dates, and other concepts that were then tested in worksheet formats.

My education affected the way I interact with my environment. I do not feel like I really know how to solve problems and negotiate with other people. Moreover, I never learned how to ask questions or make my own decisions. I was always told what to do and how to do it, and I was prevented from knowing that there are many other people, lifestyles, and cultures in the world. Sometimes, I feel angry that I never learned about other cultures. (Conversation, November 2003)

Her ways of learning and her conforming attitude did not change much during the program. She did not request a preferred field placement and accepted the placement assigned to her. During methods courses, she seemed to listen to others more than expressing her opinions and sharing ideas, yet she always diligently completed the work for her courses. Although she discussed conflicts with her cooperating teacher's pedagogy, Jessica chose to teach in the way her cooperating teacher taught without complaint (Observations, September 2003 to March 2004).

Kathy

Kathy is a 22-year-old, upper-middle-class, White female. She grew up in the suburbs of a large city in Ohio where she attended Catholic school for 12 years. She was used to going to school with peers who were similar to her in terms of their religion, race, socioeconomic status, and appearance (i.e., wearing uniforms every day). She remembered being comfortable with her surroundings. Although she lived in the suburbs, she did not believe she was completely naïve due to her volunteer work and friends from many other areas of the city and country. She shared one exemplary experience:

I remember once getting onto a campus bus only to notice that I was surrounded by people of Asian and African American descent—I was the only Caucasian student on the bus. I was taken

aback by this realization. Being the minority in something as trivial as a bus ride is something that others constantly experience, but it took me going to one of the finest educational institutions in the country to experience this—even if only for a few minutes. (Diversity story for a course assignment, December 2003)

Her eye-opening experience, like Hannah and Jessica, occurred during college and then also during the First Education Experience Program (FEED) where she was placed in an urban elementary school. Kathy learned to recognize similarities and differences among her different groups of students. She compared her FEED experience with her current student teaching experience:

By comparing the behavior in my FEED urban classroom to the behavior of my students in my current suburban elementary school placement, I can see huge differences. I notice that there is not that big of a difference in academic abilities, but there is a big difference in behavior. The students in the urban public classroom must have had feedback that their active engagement was valued, and in the suburban classroom that I have had the most recent experience with, they are aware that the teacher values quiet listening (Diversity story for a course assignment, December 2003).

Kathy was very careful not to describe students in urban schools negatively. She saw their active and energetic behaviors and verbal expressions as distinctive differences and believed that those behaviors were reinforced at school while students in suburban schools were encouraged to be quiet, meaning “well behaved.” Kathy’s experiences helped her recognize the ways in which socialization within schools influences students’ behavior and learning.

According to Kathy, either suburban or urban school would be okay for her field placement, but she chose a suburban school that was similar to the Catholic schools where she was educated and where she wanted to teach in the future (Informal conversation, October 2003). The school where Kathy was assigned had two curricula: a traditional teacher-directed program, and progressive, mixed-age, student-centered curriculum program. Kathy chose the traditional classroom, which was more similar to her own school experiences.

Hannah

Hannah is a 23-year-old White female who lived for 18 years in a predominantly Caucasian, middle-class, rural school district. Throughout her K–12 school experiences, there was only one African American child and no children of Asian or Latino descent. She recognized that many people in her town were not accepting of people from other cultures.

Hannah described working in urban elementary schools during college for her FEED experiences as an eye-opening experience that helped her understand issues of diversity. She mentioned that she selected her field placement in a suburban school with a progressive curriculum because she wanted to compare her FEED experiences in an urban school with a similar philosophy (Informal Conversation, October 2003). However, the schools were philosophically quite different, and she seemed to struggle to understand multiple approaches to progressive curriculum.

Hannah had already completed a special education undergraduate degree when she entered the M.Ed. certification program. Her commitment to being well prepared for teaching was exceptional. Hannah’s experiences and learning about diversity appeared to be primarily oriented toward getting a teaching job.

I knew I was going to pursue the M.Ed., and I wanted to have a strong background in order to enter the program and get a job, so I got a special education degree. I wanted to join in Mt. Olivet because I think it will help me to get a job, but it is going to be too much for me to handle with all the course work and student teaching. (Conversation, December 2003)

Overall my participants' backgrounds and experiences revealed differences as well as similarities. Except for Erin, all participants grew up in racially homogeneous areas. Except for Courtney, the participants' selection of their elementary school was closely related to their own schooling experiences. The participants' background and teacher education program experiences especially student teaching experiences, seemed to influence their conceptualizations of teaching for social justice. Table 2 provides a summary of the ways in which their conceptualizations changed during the time the participants were enrolled in the M.Ed. program, where they had similar and different understandings, and whether teaching for social justice was realized in their teaching.

Table 2
Field Placement

Grade	K	1	K	K	3	1&2
Total No. of Students	18	23	20	19	22	22
Non-White Students	67%	60%	80%	0%	0%	4%
ESL Students	39%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Free Lunch	83%	87%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Gender (Girl/Boy)	7/11	10/13	5/15	10/9	14/8	14/8

Defining a Goal of Teaching for Social Justice

When the participants were asked to define *teaching for social justice*, at first everyone seemed to struggle with providing a definition in their own words. They responded with statements like: "I don't know," "I have no idea," "It is about the law," "I have never thought about it," or "I can tell you a definition I memorized when I was an undergraduate."

One month after the initial conversation, the participants could provide definitions although they varied in detail. Courtney and Erin's definitions were elaborate while the others were still quite short.

Their definitions of teaching for social justice were as follows:

Courtney: Uh, social justice, I probably would use the word *equality*. Uh, you know, social justice. Everyone wants to have the same access. Let's say education. Is there any equal access? People, um, do they have the same opportunities or are they given, are their stories being listened to, do they have access to the power structures. I think that would be considered social justice. Probably *equality* would be the word that I would put with *social justice* (Interview, September 2003).

Erin: When I heard of justice, I think of the court system or something like that. I guess everybody has to have same opportunity no matter their race, their background, and people not suffering. There are some people in this world who have enormous amount of things, everything they want plus more, and there are people who struggle to have something to eat. I don't think that should be. I think everybody should have basic needs. They shouldn't struggle to get that, struggle to get extra

stuff but not to survive. Social justice is, I think, that everybody's needs should be met. I don't know if that's right (Interview, September 2003).

Wendy: Treat other racial people in the same manner, fairly; give them equal opportunities as everyone else (Interview, September 2003).

Jessica: What I think of when it comes in my mind, I think of making things equal within society (Interview, September 2003).

Kathy: When I think of justice, it is maybe equality and fairness. Social justice, I would say equality and fairness of all different types and groups of people, kids and adults, differences, ethnics and economic (Interview, September 2003).

Hannah: Equal or fair (Interview, September 2003).

A description of the similarities and differences between the participants' conceptions of social justice was organized into one major theme: equality and equity.

Equality and Equity

Equality and equity is the most consistent theme in the initial definitions of *social justice* from the 6 participants—meaning equal opportunity or equal access. One month after giving their initial definitions, the participants' concepts of equality were more elaborate and included examples. All participants spoke of equality, meaning the same for everyone, but Courtney also included the idea of equity related to individual cultural and linguistic differences.

The participants were from different backgrounds, had different amounts of experience with diverse people, and requested different types of school settings. Despite these differences, their initial definitions of *social justice* were relatively similar and related to sameness. Courtney, who was a nontraditional, mature, student with diverse experiences, and Erin, who had experiences with racial discrimination and had lived away from her home country, had more elaborate definitions than the other participants, but still there was a focus on equality and sameness.

The participants' conceptualization of teaching for social justice was reflected in their life goals, beliefs, experiences, and situations, although these relations are difficult to assign to a single specific influence. For example, Courtney who did her student teaching in an inner city school, believed that equal access and opportunities for everyone were basic rights; however, she added that teachers need to listen to each child's voice and respond to their different needs (Interview, October 2003). Erin specifically emphasized equal distribution of basic needs as a fundamental right by saying, "Social justice is, I think, that everybody's needs should be met equally" (Interview, October 2003). Her response seemed to be drawn from her experiences with her students in her classroom, 87% of whom received free lunch. That is, Courtney and Erin who did their student teaching in urban settings, were concerned about inequitable access to resources, which may have been influenced by their exposure to the needs of the diverse students in their inner city schools.

Unlike Courtney and Erin, Wendy, who also did her student teaching in an inner city school, described equality as related to holding the same expectations for everyone, so that every child was expected to do the same thing.

When they [three-year-olds] answered the question for “the question of the day—everyday activity,” everybody is expected to give the same answer. The teacher will help some children when they need extra help, but they are all expected to answer. They don’t have an option. There is a kid who used to hide and nod, but the teacher made him answer or “you’ll have to leave the group” because that’s what everybody is expected to do. So, I would say that it is socially fair. It’s also expecting them to be able to do what everybody else is doing. It is fair to them so they continue to progress. They don’t want them to be fall back because, just, you lower the expectations. (Interview, October 2003)

Wendy stressed the students’ obligation to equally participate in the classroom activities. She seemed to believe that to be “socially fair” a teacher should make all children, without exception, do the same thing. This seems to be related to her primary beliefs about teaching, as well as her struggles in her urban placements, which was focused on controlling the classroom and managing student behavior.

Although she initially defined *social justice* as equality, Jessica’s conception of social justice was somewhat unique. She explained, “Do the right thing ... when you did something wrong, try to make it up” (Interview, October 2003). She seemed to assume that right and wrong were not subjective, situational, or value-oriented (Noddings, 1984). Her understanding may be related to her early socialization toward conformity in her family and educational school contexts. She grew up “doing what I was told to do.” When she did not do what she was supposed to do, there were consequences (Informal conversation, October 2003).

Jessica also explained that teachers need to provide children with more autonomy to achieve social justice. The desire for autonomy seemed to be in tension with doing the right thing, seen as obeying and being responsible to moral rules and expectations that are assumed without question. Jessica’s interest in increased autonomy may be a rejection of the way she had been educated: doing what she was told to do. Doing the right thing and desiring autonomy remained in tension for Jessica throughout the program.

Wendy and Hannah further applied the concept of equality to teacher hiring practices:

Wendy: I think it’s gonna be really hard for me to get a job because I am white woman. I think. I don’t know. If I compete with a man, because there are not many male teachers in the elementary profession, they are gonna take him over me. I feel that. Maybe I am wrong. But it is not fair. I don’t know. I could be totally wrong. Maybe it’s just a myth. (Interview, October 2003)

Hannah: I think that I know that many schools have to be very diverse, so they hire, I mean, there is the possibility that someone with a different race would get a job over me because they need diversity in their schools. So that is definitely a possibility of injustice. (Interview, October 2003)

Issues related to affirmative action are often discounted if the person has a concept of justice as equality (that everyone should be treated the same); and it is even harder to affirm if the person feels he or she is personally being treated unfairly. Hannah was especially clear about her priority of getting a teaching job. She was focused on anything that would benefit her getting a job. She thought that teaching multicultural education would help her to get a good grade because that was what many professors and I, as the supervisor, expected (Post-lesson conference, November, 2004), and she said she would

consider joining in the special service learning project to add an item on her resume (Informal conversation, April, 2004).

Kathy and Hannah explained fairness as calling on students equally; their placements were in less diverse classrooms. When it came to gender issues, they both spoke of equality as sameness; they thought they should call on boys and girls equally, but they also mentioned different frequencies with students of different abilities.

Hannah: Like when I call on somebody, I try to call on the kids who are less advanced. And I try not to make them feel like you don't know what you are talking about. I try to make everyone feel successful. It doesn't work always but I try (Interview, October 2003).

Kathy explained how she tried to be fair toward the students with different abilities. For example, when she called on students during large-group instruction, she tried to call on them fairly. However, in practice, she more frequently called on her case study student (for her methods course assignment) who was less advanced. In fact, she called on him whenever he raised his hand because she did not want him to feel like his ideas were not good enough to share. She felt that calling on him more often than the others was not fair to other students, "just the average kind of kids." Like Hannah, there seemed to be a tension between treating children equally and trying to respond to individual differences. The focus seemed to be solely on individual differences in terms of academic ability, not cultural identities or interactions.

Understanding Approaches of Teaching for Social Justice

At the end of the program, when the participants were asked what approaches they could use to teach for social justice, their responses were somewhat different from their definitions of the goal. Five of the participants thought teaching for social justice is teaching about different cultures as content knowledge. Because this involved teaching extra content, it would be challenging to find time in the existing curriculum. Within this view, there were other obstacles, such as a lack of cultural diversity in a classroom. They also thought it would be difficult to teach about diversity in a homogeneous classroom.

Courtney, Wendy, Kathy, and Hannah thought social justice was an extra area of content to be taught. It could be incorporated in social studies or language arts but would be more difficult to integrate into mathematics and science.

Courtney: I have these kids and taught them about Africa. When they go to first grade, I would like them to remember that they have prior knowledge of this, to recall their prior knowledge. (Interview, October 2003)

Wendy mentioned social studies where she could teach about social justice, and she seemed to define social studies broadly, which includes problem solving and conflict resolution.

Wendy: Like social studies, maybe when there are issues that arise, they can vote on them; what's the right thing to do? When there is a dispute between the kids, you can talk out the problem. You have the right to say your feelings about the situation, and you have right to respond and say your feelings about the situation. That's how you fix the problem. (Interview, October 2003)

Kathy: Maybe social studies and language arts. (Interview, October 2003)

Kathy also mentioned:

I think social justice is important, but I think that [it is] probably easier if we have more diverse students like different ethnic or SES [social economic status], even academic differences don't exist much here [her elementary school]. (Interview, March 2003)

Hannah: I think we can look at some multicultural literature, read aloud during the day. (Interview, October 2003)

Their perception of teaching for social justice paralleled Hannah's response about when they could teach for social justice: "It may be possible to teach social justice to 2nd graders, but I don't think preschoolers, and even kindergarten and 1st grade" (Interview, October 2003). Hannah was assuming that there was content to teach, which might be too difficult for younger children, rather than thinking about social justice as equity issues involved in all social relations.

Unlike the other participants, Erin and Jessica had a more inclusive conception of teaching for social justice:

Erin: I can incorporate multicultural things in the classroom with language arts, maybe being careful about languages you use like, "Okay guys," or boys become doctors and girls become nurses, you can talk about that. Try to reduce stereotypes. Have pictures of woman fire fighters and male nurses or anything like that. Social studies for different books about multicultural things, you don't just read. Even if you are not teaching them multicultural things, having things in the classroom, things made available. (Interview, October 2003)

Jessica: Well, just everything you do, you should think about it. The books you choose to read, and the kinds of books you have them read on their own, what kinds of activities you set up for them. Like if you do maps, you should talk about other places in the world, what happens in these places, and then take that up further, I think. (Interview, October 2003)

Underlying Erin and Jessica's responses is the understanding that social justice issues pervade teaching choices and pedagogy, and it requires consideration of issues of social justice.

Interestingly, when the participants defined *teaching for social justice*, they primarily talked about equality, and used primarily social interactions as examples. But when they were asked how they would teach for social justice, most of them considered social justice as a separate content knowledge or concept that could be taught for older students (they considered it too abstract or complicated for younger students).

Their actual student teaching practice, however, did not necessarily match how they talked about teaching for social justice. For example, Courtney considered social justice content, and said she could include social justice in language arts or social studies, but her efforts of reducing stereotypes and building on students' cultural and linguistic resources as well as content integration were not evident in her teaching throughout the program. It seems that teaching for social justice is a complex concept, and some participants did not seem to recognize the differences between their understandings and

practices. For this reason, teacher educators, especially supervisors, may need to explicitly raise teacher candidates' awareness of differences between conceptualization and action.

Change in Understandings of Teaching for Social Justice

During the course of the program, with the influences from the university courses, interaction with me, student teaching in different school contexts, and other related factors, some participants changed their understandings, while some did not. Over time, some of their understandings of teaching for social justice became more extensive, while others were still quite limited. Courtney and Erin shared their expanded understandings of teaching for social justice this way:

Courtney: If you teach this [social justice], they [young children] will internalize it. As they grow up, especially these young kids, will keep that inside of them, and they will use it. They will do something good for the society. But I don't know whether they can keep that when they have classrooms that are not sensitive about such issues. (Interview, March 2004)

Erin: I have a better understanding of social justice. When you mentioned it at the beginning of the year, I was like, "What is social justice?" but now I have a better understanding of it. It is more like inclusive education to make an inclusive society, I think. Social justice education is more than just celebrating different holidays. It is all related to the actual ins and outs of everyday lives, understanding how the kids think, how they learn, how they interact, social interaction, how they talk. When the children who learned those things grow up, the world will be changed. (Interview, March 2004)

Both Courtney and Erin emphasized building an inclusive classroom and society and changing the world to be a better place as the goal of teaching for social justice. In their courses, they were learning that in a diverse and globalized society, teaching for social justice should be more than teaching about different cultures as events or content areas; it should include academic excellence for all learners (Ladson-Billing, 1994), learning to be competent democratic members of society, and learning to make the world better place. Courtney and Erin's ideas are similar to the ideas in these course readings, and they may have been influenced by these ideas.

Wendy's understanding of teaching for social justice did not seem to change. However, she mentioned that she started to understand African American students better, and her experiences tutoring at the Mt. Olivet helped her expand her ideas (Informal Conversation, April 2004). Based on the observation of her student teaching, her image of students of color and classroom management changed in positive ways.

Jessica originally focused on "doing the right thing" and conforming to school expectations for behavior and responsibility. When she was asked later to talk more about what she meant by "doing the right thing," she answered this way:

Definitely not right or not fair to exclude a certain people. Definitely not fair to your children, not even if in the setting of my elementary school with all white children. I don't think it is fair for them to exclude all different cultures, because when they leave school, they need to work with different kinds of people with different kinds of beliefs. Who knows if they even understand that others don't celebrate Christmas and everybody doesn't celebrate Thanksgiving, cause right now I am

pretty sure that is what they think. So definitely it's not fair, not giving them a chance to learn about different cultures. It is the teacher's responsibility to teach their kids that there is an all-different but wonderful world out there. (Interview, February 2004)

Jessica's understanding of doing the right thing seems to have expanded toward being more proactive about teaching about diversity. She did not have many opportunities to implement multicultural education due to her cooperating teacher's teaching approach. She appeared to be more comfortable doing what she was told than being assertive about teaching for social justice. She did, nevertheless, display books that represented diverse groups of people, she asked me what she could do with her Caucasian students, and she asked me to direct her to diversity resources.

Both Jessica and Kathy held the same conviction that the children of the dominant group, who were in a homogeneous context, needed to learn about diversity and social justice even though there were challenges in doing so. Jessica made efforts to raise issues of social justice by introducing multicultural literature, but Kathy made no attempts to incorporate diversity into her student teaching placement. There was little space for Kathy to implement teaching for social justice due to her cooperating teacher's tight schedule, but she did not have any problems with these limitations. Hannah did not elaborate her understanding of teaching for social justice throughout the year, and she was resistant to even talking about diversity and teaching for social justice, even by the end of the program.

These cases illustrate a complex process of meaning making and constructing a personal and social understanding of social justice. The definitions reflect differences and similarities, and these were helpful to think about the possible multiple perspectives of social justice constructed by teacher candidates as they learn to teach.

Conclusion

This research was guided by my understanding that teaching for social justice is complex, fluid, and situated, and by my curiosity about the ways teachers might change their minds while learning to teach. Understandings are continuously constructed and reconstructed individually and collectively. Therefore, the meaning of teaching for social justice must be negotiated, and those who work in teacher preparation should support this accordingly.

Teaching for social justice needs to be approached both theoretically and practically, as Freire (1970) insists. That is, teachers need to be more conscious about how they make meaning of teaching for social justice and how that affects their teaching practice. Through praxis (theory into practice), teachers are able to examine their knowledge, intentions, and practices related to social justice to develop a framework for inquiring into their practices and creating pedagogical approaches (Bell, 1997). However, as this study shows, creating contexts where praxis is possible related to teaching for social justice, it is complicated and not always supportive of helping teacher candidates teach for social justice.

Throughout the program, Courtney, Erin, and Jessica could articulate their understandings of teaching for social justice, and they implemented their ideas into their teaching. Wendy could not articulate her conceptualization of teaching for social justice, but her negative attitude toward African Americans noticeably changed. Kathy could verbalize the concept of teaching for social justice, and Hannah retained the same concepts she had in the beginning, but neither of them attempted to implement anything in their classrooms related to teaching for social justice.

For some, their definitions and understandings were in conflict with their teaching practices. There were many reasons for such differences—different understandings, time pressures, and different school contexts with support or lack of support. Also, as teacher candidates, they were not always free to make decisions about curriculum and teaching to match their personal goals. Their goals were sometimes in conflict with the goals of their cooperating teachers.

In the teacher education program, the faculty demonstrated a strong emphasis on teaching diverse learners, but they had somewhat different understandings and teaching approaches, and they were more or less explicit about teaching for social justice. The coursework might have had a stronger impact on students' conceptions of social justice if the faculty had together constructed more clearly articulated shared goals and a consistent approach in the courses.

The participants of this study and I came from different backgrounds with diverse experiences. These individual differences, the participants' student teaching placements, learning experiences in the university, and their interactions with me as their supervisor and a researcher interacted with their stable or changed understandings and their degrees of commitment to social justice education. Despite their differences in learning to become teachers for social justice, they all expressed the importance of properly teaching all learners, and this was evident in their teaching in different ways. Teaching all learners was a consistent theme throughout the university courses. This was a beginning way to think about social justice, but it doesn't go very far toward considering inequities in society that influence the students they are teaching. Only Courtney and Erin showed evidence of a more justice orientation. Each of these students had had diverse experiences before the program, and their field placements were in diverse classrooms where social justice issues were more apparent. It was not possible to determine whether prior experience, school context, or the program was most influential.

The results from these case studies suggest that teacher educators should understand and incorporate teacher candidates' existing knowledge and values, and consider the complex influences on their learning to teach. Teacher educators need to provide teacher candidates with opportunities to discuss and reflect on their experiences.

While I believe from this study that teacher educators can be influential, despite the strong focus of the teacher education program on teaching diverse students and my consistent focus on teaching for social justice as a university supervisor, we did not create meaningful change for all of the teacher candidates. I was not able to facilitate changes in some of their conceptualizations and/or teaching practices. This is similar to other researchers (Pohan, 1996; Ross & Smith, 1992; Sleeter, 1988; Weisman & Garza, 2002) who have also found that beliefs about important ideas related to teaching for social justice have deep roots in students' backgrounds and experiences and are not always amendable to change, at least within the short time they are in teacher education programs.

One strong suggestion from this study is that teacher educators need to find ways to check student candidates' understandings and how these are being influenced by their prior experiences as well as by the program. A second suggestion is that programs are likely to have more influence on students' understandings and teaching for social justice if the university faculty, university supervisors, and mentor teachers together have a shared, explicit, and consistent focus on teaching for social justice.

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