

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE COURSES IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

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## ABSTRACT

*The social justice perspective is become more popular in teacher preparation programs as a response to growing diversity in schools and to the perceived inadequacies of multicultural education. This alternative to multicultural education argues that teachers should be advocates for students and their communities, helping to address inequities in schools. This project sought to explore social justice education in more depth by examining two classes of pre-service teachers at a private Christian university in the Southwest United States. Students were asked to describe their expectations and experiences with social justice curriculum in a required social justice teacher education course. The analysis of the project's results indicates that pre-service teachers at faith institutions must be given hands-on, practical opportunities to grapple with social justice and their faith in order to begin to understand how social justice might inform their future work as teachers.*

## THE PROBLEM

Multicultural education is an approach to schooling designed to help teachers promote democracy and a better understanding of the cultures that exist in classrooms (Banks, 2008). Multicultural education also seeks to foster equal learning opportunities for all students, regardless of gender, class, or racial or cultural identity (Banks, 2004). This approach to education can help students develop more positive intergroup attitudes and improve interracial relationships (Banks, 1995). However, studies have shown that some approaches to multicultural education have diminished race and ethnicity to disconnected artifacts and events, including eating ethnic foods, celebrating heroes and holidays, singing familiar or clichéd songs, dancing prototypical dances, reading folktales, or engaging in benevolent discussions of race and ethnicity (Au, 2009; Banks, 1993, 1995; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Research suggests that multicultural education courses for pre-service teachers have little to no positive impact on students' perceptions of diversity (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Nieto (1999)

argues that multicultural education is seen as a safer, more benign approach to integrating real social problems into the classroom, as opposed to the alternative model: social justice education. This is in part because some pre-service teachers are willing to improve self-awareness and uncover personal biases but are unsure of or uninterested in questioning the broad inequalities that exist in schools (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011). Despite these concerns, many teacher preparation programs have embedded single courses on multicultural education into the program of study (Kaur, 2012; Sleeter, 2001).

The social justice perspective has made its way into many teacher preparation programs as a response to growing diversity in schools and as a response to the perceived inadequacies of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2009; Florian, 2009; Madhuri, Walker, Landmann-Johnsey, & Laughter, 2015; Nieto, 1999, 2013; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). This alternative to multicultural education argues that teachers should advocate to help eliminate inequities, especially those related to race/ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, ability/disability, and sexual

orientation, and encourage students to be involved in this advocacy process (Guerra, Nelson, Jacobs, & Yamamura, 2013). The hope is that pre-service teachers can become change agents rather than recognizing our nation's diversity in their future classrooms without taking substantive action.

Despite the growing diversity in schools (Florian, 2009; Madhuri, Walker, Landmann-Johnsey, & Laughter, 2015), there is little clarity on what constitutes quality social justice education for pre-service teachers and the impact of social justice education (McDonald & Zeicher, 2009). There have been no known studies done to date on the impact of a social justice course on pre-service teachers at a faith-based institution. Perhaps most powerfully, the last few years' relentless media firestorm relating to social inequities insists that we understand the impact of social justice courses on students in institutions of higher education.

### THE PURPOSE

This project hoped to address the gap in social justice education for pre-service teachers in the Southwest United States by asking how pre-service teachers at a large private Christian university describe their expectations and experiences with a social justice curriculum in a required social justice teacher education course. At the university described in this reflection, the prevailing opinion was that a social justice course embedded in the pre-service teacher program of study aligned with the university's Christian mission and Jesus's advocacy for the oppressed, as well as serve as a plea for pre-service teachers to be advocates for students (Zeichner, 2010).

The author specifically wanted to explore how pre-service teachers would react to a social justice course and how they might perceive their learning and their preparation to become teachers as a result of the course. The goal was to use project reflections to support programmatic or course improvement and inform the university regarding the impact of a social justice curriculum on pre-service teachers. On a more personal note, the author sought to align with and show support for the university's mission while helping her pre-service teachers become social justice advocates. As a former public school educator and self-identified "social justice warrior," the author wanted to determine how social justice education would fit into a Christian university and

what kind of impact it can have on pre-service teachers. On a broader scale, the author wanted to start to address the gap in literature by determining whether social justice curriculum, an under-researched area in pre-service teacher programs (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016), influences pre-service teachers' perspectives.

More generally, this project drew on the foundational work of Freire (1970). Throughout the duration of this project, the author worked from the perspective that teaching is social justice. Teaching is a fundamentally radical act that encourages students to see broader perspectives beyond their own and to utilize dialogue and action between teacher and student to shift the face of education. Schools and classrooms can be loci for justice and liberation. Freire's (1970) concept of banking education, where a teacher delivers information and the student passively sits and receives that information, is in dialogic contrast to the social justice perspective that involves celebrating all voices in the classroom while also examining existing power structures. The idea of teaching as liberation is especially significant in a Christian university where various political and social perspectives abound, especially as it relates to social justice.

Social justice research in the field of education is growing (e.g. Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011; Kinloch, 2010; Nieto, 2013, 2014; Winn & Johnson, 2011). Most of this research is focused on the policies related to social justice in schools (Robertson & Guerra, 2016). For instance, there has been debate over the last two decades whether anti-racist curriculum should or should not be taught in schools. These discussions are important; however, exploring the substantive, practical nature of the social justice perspective in classrooms is necessary as well. Rarely does education research interrogate into what impact does social justice curriculum have on teachers' perspectives of diversity? On pre-service teachers' perspectives? On students' perspectives? In short, does social justice curriculum actually work and accomplish what it sets out to do? What kinds of curriculum seem to have an impact on teacher and student perspectives and what kinds of curriculum does not? What qualities make up effective social justice education? Even more, little research asks what kind of impact the curriculum might have on pre-service teachers – those who

are being trained to enter the teaching workforce and will encounter great diversity in classrooms. The author wanted to know the answers, or at least initiate dialogue, on these questions.

This course was new to the university at the time this project took place. A few online sections of the course and one ground section of the course were taught prior to this project. Because the course was new to the university and a response to the national trend in teacher education to move away from multicultural education, the author was curious how pre-service teachers would respond to the course, particularly in a Christian setting. Anecdotally, the author had heard that students were struggling with grades and the content in the few sections of the course that had commenced, especially compared to other program-related courses. The social justice course replaced a course that included topics such as the aforementioned multicultural education, cultural values, learning styles, stereotyping, and cultural incompatibilities. The previous course did not include a focus on faith. The new social justice course for pre-service teachers served as a response to the growing diversity in schools while also taking into account the Christian worldview of the university. The lack of knowledge in this area led the author to want to know more about the impact of social justice curriculum on pre-service teachers at a Christian university.

### THE PROCESS

The 16-week social justice course for pre-service teachers focused on various social justice topics, including understanding one's own and others' cultural identities, becoming culturally proficient when communicating with education stakeholders, embedding service learning in schools, understanding the impact of privilege and power on teaching and learning, and analyzing curriculum for cultural competence. The project used a qualitative descriptive case study design with multiple or collective case studies (Yin, 2003a, 2003b) to analyze two required classes social justice teacher education classes. The author, who served as the teacher of record, started the course by asking the pre-service teachers to reflect on their personal identities. Later in the course, the pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on the roles of various stakeholders in schools, including the perspectives of parents, teachers, administrators,

staff, students, and community members. Finally, the author asked the pre-service teachers to set their sights externally by asking students to consider power and privilege, as well as what social justice looks like in their local communities and in their future schools of employment.

The author collected student perspectives using a pre / post course survey as part of IRB-exempt typical educational practices and provided the pre-service teachers a link to the pre / post survey via Survey Monkey in the first and last weeks of the course. Teachers frequently use surveys to determine the efficacy of their teaching practices (Center for Teaching, 2017; Hanover Research, 2013). Participation was voluntary and anonymous. There were no grades attached to the survey, and they were encouraged to respond openly and honestly due to the anonymity of the survey. Fifty-five pre-service teachers completed the pre course survey, and forty-two pre-service teachers completed the post course survey. The decline in participation was due to absences and natural attrition. These students were mostly in their third year of study and represented a range of demographics, although a large majority identified as female. The author did not collect additional demographic information to help ensure honest, open responses from students. The survey asked descriptive questions and numerical questions regarding social justice, their faith, their experiences related to social justice, and their experiences with the course. The author used the content analysis method to qualitatively analyze the survey question responses, seeking to identify key themes based on robustness, or the prominence of the theme relative to other instances (Carney, 1972; Holsti, 1968, 1969; Krippendorff & Bock, 2008).

### THE OUTCOMES

For the purposes of this article, the author will reflect on two discoveries from this project based on the survey feedback. Although this project provoked many reflections, two were surprising because the author did not expect the scope and breadth of pre-service teachers who claimed that their faith and teaching skill set were positively impacted by the course.

**Finding 1.** Many students' expressed that their faith was deeply affected by the course. At the beginning of the course, few students

commented on the link between Christianity and advocacy for the underserved, or if there was a link, it was discussed in platitudes about loving and serving all. By the end of the course, every student who took the survey commented on the intersection between Christianity, their personal faith, and social justice, noting the inextricable relationship initiated through the course. One student commented, "This class has taught me to have a less egocentric mindset. It has taught me the value of putting myself in someone else's shoes. That is something that I already knew from church and the Bible. This class taught me how to apply it to my life and how to actually go out there and do it." Another student commented, "I believe that every individual is created equally in the sight of God, so I am striving to interrogate my biases and prejudices and tear them down. I see more and more of my ingrained ideas of how the world should be – and how privileged they are. Thus, social justice takes an active role in my life as I seek to implement Biblical principles and love and respect all differences." Another student said, "Social justice makes me want to strive to love and accept more. My eyes have been opened throughout this course to just how many ways I unknowingly fall back in my cultural competence. After going through this class, I have a better understanding of how to make sure that I'm doing the best that I can...by going out of my comfort zone to learn about other cultures and religions and strengthen the kind of teacher that I will be."

**Finding 2.** A second finding was value in the practical nature of the course. The practicality of the course curriculum and instruction was integral to student learning. Many pre-service teachers commented in the post-survey on the hands-on nature of the course. A student stated, "I liked that there were opportunities to go out and be active in our learning and not just read it from a book or PowerPoint." Another said, "The assignments were really valuable." Another mentioned, "I loved this course so much and wish I could take it again." One student noted that the course had practical benefits, even benefits that would serve non-education majors, "I think this course is a course that all students should take. It goes beyond the classroom and is beneficial to all workplaces." Finally, a student said, "I really enjoyed this course because I had the opportunity to practice service

learning. It was truly a great experience."

Relating to Finding 1, the instructor discovered that although she lacked formal training in Biblical studies she was still able to impart the Biblical perspective on serving and advocacy by emphasizing a Christian perspective in various ways. In almost every class, the author asked the pre-service teachers to discuss the Bible as it relates to social justice. The instructor shared Bible verses, and the pre-service teachers were encouraged to share Bible verses to connect with the course content and topic assessments. For instance, students discussed the Black Lives Matter movement, how students might grapple with the movement as Christians and as pre-service teachers, how it might affect their teaching and student learning, and what the Bible suggests about similar movements. Even though the instructor was not an expert in this area, she was able to utilize the pre-service teachers' knowledge of the Bible, her own Christian faith, and course materials to connect advocacy to the Christian faith to teaching. This finding suggests that a social justice course for pre-service teachers can inform a student's faith and the role of service and advocacy in their life.

With Finding 2, the pre-service teachers appreciated the practicality of the course, specifically the service learning opportunity and ability to teach social justice curriculum to their peers. It is important to note that the instructor made changes to the standard social justice curriculum the university provided to instructors. Based on prior experience with social justice education, the instructor knew that a few alterations were necessary to enhance the course's efficacy and give it a practical slant. For instance, the instructor altered an assignment that asked for a cultural competence essay into writing a complete lesson plan and teaching an activity from that lesson plan for a specific grade level that (a) demonstrated cultural competence and (b) addressed a selected cultural identifier like race, socioeconomic status, language, or gender. The author also altered a service learning research assignment into a service learning project with a subsequent reflection. This suggests that in order for a social justice course for pre-service teachers to be effective there needs to be an element of practicality, so students can envision or act out what advocacy might look



like in their future classrooms. If a social justice course is steeped in perspective, theory, and policy without acknowledging the very real work that goes into advocacy, there will be a gap in learning.

### REFLECTIVE CRITIQUES

As diversity continues to have an impact on students, schools, and policies, it is imperative that researchers and teachers look for ways to foster dialogue on social justice and advocacy in the classroom. A multicultural approach is deemed to be insufficient, but intentionally crafted social justice courses seem to show promise. In light of an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-faith society, now, more than ever, educators must be prepared to serve the public good by bringing curriculum devoted to social justice into the classroom (Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011; Kinloch, 2010; Nieto, 2013, 2014; Winn & Johnson, 2011).

While very limited in its scope, this project suggests that social justice courses can encourage pre-service teachers to become active agents in social justice – for example, through community service, teaching culturally competent lessons, and examining school curriculum for diversity and bias. The hands-on, practical application woven into the course appears to have helped students connect with the topic of social justice, suggesting that future efforts in this area might benefit from a similar approach.

Going forward, the author would like to expand her own understanding of the intersection between Jesus, the Bible, Christianity, and social justice. Engaging in more training and course work on this topic would benefit someone teaching a social justice-related course at a Christian university. The author believes that expanded understanding of faith-social justice connection points would be helpful. The author also wants to expand this project to more course sections, to different instructors, and perhaps to different modalities (traditional classes, as well as online classes). More of type of work is needed to gain a complete picture of mandatory social justice courses for pre-service teachers.

This small-scale case study and reflection at one faith-based university suggests that social justice courses for pre-service teachers have an impact. Pre-service teachers at faith institutions must be given hands-on, practical opportunities

to grapple with social justice and their faith in order to begin to understand who they are, how they see themselves, how they fit into our pluralist society, and how this informs their future work as classroom teachers.

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