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## Sustaining Social Justice Learning: What Teacher Educators Can Do

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### Abstract

As public schools become more diverse in terms of student population, the US teaching force remains relatively stable. For this reason, teacher education programs need to provide and sustain social justice learning to ensure pre-service teachers enter classrooms prepared to teach *all* students. This article examines how pre-service teachers took up identities as social justice educators and sustained social justice learning during lapses in teacher education curricula. Analysis reveals that teacher educators can incorporate methods into course curriculum to ensure social justice learning is sustained in teacher education. Implications for teacher educators include strategies to provide social justice pedagogy scaffolding and offer plausible suggestions to incorporate and sustain social justice education for pre-service teachers when absent in future teacher education curricula.

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## Introduction

When students in my literacy methods teacher education courses share stories of their elementary school memories, they often share tales of favorite teachers, private schools, and strong ties between home and school. They rarely describe the cultural separation between home and school, English language learning, or family unemployment. Many of my students, who will soon enter elementary classrooms as teachers, do not share similar cultural experiences with their future students. Often, these same students have had little encouragement to think critically about how their more mainstream experiences will impact their identities and practices as elementary teachers. Like most teacher education students across the country, my students are overwhelmingly White, female, and middle-class.

As public schools become more demographically diverse in terms of student population, the United States teacher demographics remain relatively stable. Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi (2011) reported that in 1986, 91% of U.S. teachers were White, and 69% were female. In 2011, these statistics remained relatively unchanged; 84% of U.S. teachers were White and female. However, Lowenstein (2009) cautions against homogenizing White, female pre-service teachers as a monolithic group. Instead, she recommends reframing pre-service teachers as learners with rich experiences about culture. She encourages teacher educators to position White pre-service teachers as learners and encourages them to share their cultural experiences and understandings. In this article, I take up this charge and present examples of four White, middle-class female pre-service teachers who took up, maintained, and sustained social justice identities in their teacher education programs. Although many U.S. teacher education programs, such as the one in this study, require mandatory diversity or multicultural education courses (For more detailed discussions see Lowenstein, 2009; Zeichner, 2009), a consistent recognition of diversity as multi-faceted is often absent, interrupted, or ignored across teacher education courses. This means that teacher education courses often lack critical engagement with social and cultural issues and faculty may not be well-versed in culturally or socially diverse issues

(Lowenstein, 2009; Zeichner, 2009). In this article, I present pre-service teachers who actively sustained their critical literacy learning and emerging identities as socially just educators by utilizing critical literacy tools learned in my literacy methods course. I argue that pre-service teachers want social justice experiences in their teacher education programs, and when these experiences are not offered, pre-service teachers seek opportunities to sustain their learning. In particular, I examine the ways that pre-service teachers took up social justice identities, how pre-service teachers sustained their social justice learning, and strategies teacher educators can use to facilitate enduring social justice learning. I offer recommendations for teacher educators to act as mentors, provide supportive contexts for productive discussions about multicultural topics, such as social class, race, language, gender, ability, and encourage reflection about social justice pedagogy approximation in field experiences.

### **Literature Review**

Social justice education seeks transformative educational practices that are inclusive of the students they serve. For the purposes of this article, social justice education involves both pedagogical knowledge as well as ideological knowledge about systems of inequality in educational environments and working towards equality through social action. In particular, social justice educators actively pursue critical pedagogies that include space for classroom discussions and exploration of sociocultural topics like gender, language, race, and socioeconomic status. Kaur (2012) argued that social justice education is both a moral and political undertaking since educators seek not only to build relationships with students and families, but they also notice and challenge “inequities and injustices that prevail in education and society” (p. 486).

Many teacher education scholars advocate incorporating issues of social justice in teacher education (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009; Garmon, 2004; Mills, 2009, 2012; Ticknor, 2012, 2014; Villegas, 2007; Zeichner, 2009). Villegas (2007) further recommends assessing pre-service dispositions towards social justice in an effort

to develop a more refined understanding of the connection between pre-service beliefs, their actions in classrooms, and how these actions impact their students' learning. Pre-service teachers who already possess dispositions compatible with social justice education, such as openness, self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, and a commitment to social justice, are more likely to take on a social justice professional identity in teacher education (Garmon, 2004; Mills, 2009). However, both Garmon and Mills argued that for pre-service teachers who do not possess these dispositions, teacher education programs can provide specific opportunities to develop professional identities inclusive of social justice education.

Teacher education programs can offer pre-service teachers opportunities to develop socially just identities in several ways. Critical literacy is one way to develop awareness and sensitivity to diversity by deconstructing dominant ideologies represented in texts and instructional practices that oppress certain groups of people based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, religion, geography, language, age, family structure, or ability. Teacher educators can engage pre-service teachers in using critical literacy to analyze how ideological beliefs and power structures always inform teaching practices, texts, and language (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Jones (2006) called for classroom teachers to engage in similar practices by deconstructing and reconstructing children's literature texts with elementary-aged students, and defined critical literacy as "a pair of eyeglasses that allows one to see beyond the familiar and comfortable" (p. 67) to deconstruct issues of power that permeate educational literacy practices. Lee (2011) argued that critical literacy was originally intended to empower marginalized groups of people to transform literacy practices by deconstructing and reconstructing written words in meaningful ways (Freire, 1993).

Field experiences offer another way to foster awareness and sensitivity to diversity through interactions with students, and approximations with social justice pedagogies in elementary classrooms. Field experiences are an important part of teacher education programs since they offer pre-service teachers opportunities to observe and participate in elementary

classrooms by planning and implementing classroom lessons. Researchers have found that bringing university classrooms and elementary classrooms together through careful coordination of coursework and mentoring can translate into pre-service teachers enacting complex teaching practices (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Zeichner & Conklin, 2005). Similarly, Mosely (2010) reports field experiences afford opportunities to approximate critical literacy teaching strategies and interact with individuals with diverse cultural experiences. Field experiences also provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to observe and create transformative spaces that encourage “a commitment to creating a world where people from diverse communities come together in an effort to understand themselves and remake the world” (Seidl & Conley, 2009, p. 125).

Additionally, opportunities for reflection in conjunction with field experience are key components for pre-service teachers to make sense of their experiences and develop awareness and sensitivity to diversity (Mills, 2009; Mills, 2012). Supportive groups, including social justice mentors, can provide guidance for reflection that fosters a value of social justice education (Ticknor, 2014). Farnsworth (2010) called for reflection “to open up possibilities for transformative social justice approaches in which socially constructed identities, discourses, and ideologies are destabilized and deconstructed” (p.1487). Organizing small groups of pre-service teachers for collaborative learning can offer safe environments for critical reflection (Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Olmedo, 1997; Ticknor, 2012; Ticknor & Cavendish, in press). Small groups can be combined through teacher education field experiences (Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Olmedo, 1997) or a combination of pre-existing social connections and university experiences (Ticknor, 2012; Ticknor & Cavendish, in press). Although an agenda is often useful for mediating small group discussions, over-reliance on pre-set topics may limit participation (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Ticknor & Cavendish, in press) and create too safe of an environment in which pre-service teachers do not “deal with the messiness of racial and ethnic identity and its relationship to the development of a social justice

practice” (Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007, p. 104). Instead, teacher educator mentors should model how to engage in critical reflection (Bates, Ramirez, & Drita, 2009), particularly in ways that guide pre-service teachers to connect course readings, class assignments, and field placement experiences in meaningful ways (Olmedo, 1997). Data collected in this study echo the suggestions in the literature, and extend them to offer recommendations for teacher educators to design curricula focused on social justice education experiences to sustain professional identity-building in the absence of consistent social justice mentors and curricula in teacher education programs.

### **Methodology**

In this section, I describe the context of the study and my role as a researcher and teacher educator. Next, I introduce the participants and give a brief overview of each participant as a teacher education student. Finally, I explain my methods for data collection and the multi-layered data analysis approach I used.

### **Context of Study**

Data for this paper are taken from a larger, longitudinal, multi-case study that investigated how pre-service teachers used language to negotiate discourses of learning to teach during the final semesters of teacher education course work and field experiences. The study took place at Midwest University (MU), which is a large public university located in the Midwest region of the United States. MU offers an undergraduate initial license in elementary education and graduates approximately 140 pre-service teachers each year. The larger study began in August 2007, and concluded in February 2009. Data for this report come primarily from August 2007 to December 2008.

Pre-service teachers at MU follow a similar sequence that includes introductory courses in education, including a multicultural course focused on diversity in educational settings, and several semesters of content method courses paired with field experiences in local elementary schools. In August 2007, the pre-service teachers in this study were in their third year of the

program, had completed the multicultural course, and enrolled in two literacy methods courses, which were scheduled together for a “block” of 2 hours and 40 minutes twice a week during the 16-week semester with one instructor. The course also had a 1 hour per week practicum field experience in a local elementary classroom. Students received literacy course content in a university classroom and read critical texts, such as *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy* (Jones, 2006). In-class reading discussions connected theory to practical application. Course assignments included planning and implementing weekly literacy child study sessions with elementary-aged students, writing reflective field journals about these interactions, and completing additional literacy-based course assignments.

The following semester, beginning January 2008, pre-service teachers enrolled in another practicum field experience. This was an 8-hour per week practicum field experience coupled with a classroom management course. During the practicum field experience, a university supervisor observed pre-service teachers teaching, and the students met weekly for small group meetings with the supervisor. The final semester of the MU teacher education program was a culminating 16-week student teaching semester (August-December 2008). Pre-service teachers shadowed an elementary classroom teacher who also served as a daily mentor. University supervisors observed pre-service teachers and met with a small group of student teachers during monthly seminar meetings.

### **Researcher’s Role**

I identify as a White, middle-class female from the Midwest region of the United States. I was an elementary teacher for 8 years in the southwestern United States. In August 2007, I was a doctoral student at MU, and the literacy methods instructor for the section in which all study participants were enrolled. After the courses ended in December 2007, I recruited former students to become participants in my study. Pre-service teachers in this article were participants in the larger study. As a former instructor turned researcher, my roles and identities shifted throughout the study. I often found myself negotiating identities as both a researcher and

a former instructor, and tried to be consciously aware of how I participated in each interaction. I strove to remain “an interested listener” (Glesne, 2006) during each interview with hopes of leveling the hierarchies in the relationships. I attempted to create a supportive environment conducive to sharing and encouraged participants to share without injecting my identity as former instructor. However, my identity as former instructor was unavoidable as I recalled and related shared course experiences, and participants sought my opinion about complex issues throughout the study.

### **Participants**

Participants were former students, and I purposefully selected them based on my anticipation that data would be generative due to their in-class contributions. All participants were also given pseudonyms for confidentiality reasons. Participants highlighted in this article contributed rich and reflective sharing about social justice issues, such as critically examining picture books or critiquing contemporary social issues, such as New Orleans post Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, I had already built rapport with participants through time spent together in class, and my ability to “fit in” with participants by adhering to locally constructed cultural norms, such as dress, behavior, and speech (Glesne, 2006). As their former instructor, I had intentionally dressed, behaved, and spoken in ways that would build rapport with my students, and the rapport continued into the research setting. Later in the study, Katy confided that from the first day of class, she knew I was someone she would like because she could tell that I was “like them.” Katy noted my similar experiences from living in the Midwest, the clothes I wore as “professional” clothing she wanted to emulate, and the way I valued the perspectives of my students. In other words, my presentation of White, female, and middle-class resonated with her.

Similar to the majority of U.S. teachers, participants represented the larger United States elementary teacher demographics of White, middle-class females. Similarly, the majority of students in the initial license in the elementary education program at MU were White females



aged 18-22 from small communities in the state or suburbs of a nearby large Midwest city. Study participants represented these demographics and varied in their religious, geographic, and social class backgrounds. Emily, Katy, Natasha, and Ava are highlighted in this article because their in-class and subsequent talk evidenced emerging social justice identities.

Emily was an easy-going student who often smiled broadly, and was an active member of the university water ski club. She had strawberry-blond hair, and routinely shared her experiences water skiing on a lake near her home in the summer. Emily grew up in a suburban neighborhood of a large Midwest city 300 miles from the university, and attended private school before attending MU. In initial in-class conversations, Emily openly shared her perspectives; however, she did not immediately present a social justice identity.

Katy was a social student who was talkative in class discussions, and wanted to be friends with everyone. She listened intently to both her instructors and her peers, and self-reflected on her own learning experiences as a student. Katy identified with struggling school-aged students, and often connected her academic struggles as a student with her teacher education experiences. Katy's mother worked at a private day care where Katy worked in the summers. Katy identified as Jewish and returned to her home community, also a suburb of a large Midwest city 300 miles from the university, to student-teach in a public school located in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood.

Ava was a studious, hard-working student who attended each literacy methods class despite having mononucleosis for two weeks of the semester. She sacrificed her health for her acquired content knowledge, grades, and attendance record. Ava was dedicated to learning as much as possible from her university instructors, and spent many hours on her assignments. Ava's mother was a special education teacher, and Ava's sister had been in special education during her years in school. Ava returned to her home community, also a suburb of a large Midwest city 300 miles from the university, to student-teach near her family home.

Natasha was a very passionate student who often spoke up in class to share dissenting views from her peers or to point out that she was the first member of her family to attend, and later complete, college. Natasha often spoke of her desire to become a teacher not only to her future students, but also to her family members. Natasha quickly cared about the students she taught. Natasha also returned to live and student-teach near her parents' home in the suburbs of a large Midwest city.

### **Data Collection**

In-depth interviews with individuals and focus groups over the entire data collection period served as my primary data source. I conducted 22 total interviews. Six of the interviews were with small groups of participants, and I conducted 16 interviews with individual participants. Pre-service teachers participated in more than one interview type. For example, Natasha participated in 7 individual interviews, and 3 small group interviews. I audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews. In-depth interviews served two important functions in my data collection: to understand “the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9) from an emic point of view, or insider perspective, over the course of time; and to build further rapport with participants to foster a community of learners and build a supportive environment for reflective talk. As rapport and support continued to develop, interviews shifted to be guided by participants and became collaborative exchanges between participants and the researcher. Secondary data sources included participant-generated written course assignments, informal interviews with program faculty, reflective field notes from literacy methods class meetings and interviews, and ethnographic field notes. I collected secondary data sources using theoretical sampling since their collection occurred simultaneously with data analysis (Merriam, 1998) in an effort to collect data that participants deemed relevant.

Data collection proceeded in four phases from August 2007 to February 2009. This article comes primarily from the analysis of phase one, two, and three data sources spanning

August 2007 to December 2008. Phase one data collection consists of participant-generated course assignments, such as weekly field journals, my lesson plans for the course, and my reflective field notes from course meetings. Phase two data sources includes transcribed individual and focus group interview data, my ethnographic field notes, and notes from interviews with program faculty. In phase three, individual and focus group interviews continue, as did my ethnographic field notes and program faculty interview notes.

### **Data Analysis**

Because in-depth interviews were my primary data source, data analysis began with repeated listenings to participant interviews. Next, I read each transcribed interview recursively for emerging themes and patterns. I used N\*6 computer software to code the conversation transcripts and assigned categories based on the emerging themes and patterns in the data. As data collection progressed, I continued to record reflective ethnographic field notes about emerging themes and patterns to follow up on with participants, in documents, and in interviews with program faculty members for triangulation purposes. I also continually looked for contradictions and tensions that did not fit the categories in the data sets by reviewing the entire data corpus with constant comparison methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1975). Final categories included:

- *Changes in Professional Identity,*
- *Changes in Learning Relationships,*
- *Changes in Discourses of “Good” Teachers,*
- *Changes in Professional Confidence, and*
- *Changes in Expected Teacher Education Curricula.*

Of particular interest to this article, I began a multi-layered discourse analysis within each category to investigate further how identities, significance, and Discourse models were (re)built in the language data (Gee, 2005). Gee distinguishes between little d/big D in discourse.

He states that little-d discourse involves the language-in-use recruited on site to enact identities and activities, while big D Discourse is the “non-language ‘stuff’” (Gee, 2005, p. 7). Big-D Discourse “involves a great deal more than ‘just language’. It involves acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking-(sometimes writing-reading) in the ‘appropriate way’ with the ‘appropriate’ props at the ‘appropriate’ times in the ‘appropriate’ places” (Gee, 2005, p. 26). Pre-service teachers construct and maintain “appropriate” identities, such as social justice educators, through both D/discourses to “enact, perform, and recognize different socially situated identities” (p. 147). Thus, pre-service teachers co-construct identities in language exchanges and performance of the appropriate ways to be recognized as a socially just educator.

Specifically, I used Gee’s building task of identities and significance and the Discourse model inquiry tool to examine excerpts of language with specific questions to analyze how pre-service teachers built professional identities, assigned significance to activities, and invoked Discourse models of effective teaching stances over time. I organized exemplary episodes, a series of conversational turns representing the same topic or theme (Lewis & Ketter, 2004), to investigate how pre-service teachers discussed diversity topics such as race, gender, and social class connected with their teacher education program experiences. For this article, I selected representative examples to report findings in my research specifically related to social justice learning and how teacher educators can better incorporate social justice education into teacher education programs to sustain pre-service teacher learning.

### **Findings**

In this section, I illustrate my findings by citing excerpts embedded in my empirical data. The following language examples presented here illustrate the desire to sustain social justice mentors, curricula, and field experiences in teacher education programs. Examples also signal the tension pre-service teachers experience when critical perspectives are absent. I present three findings to illustrate ways pre-service teachers sought resources to sustain social justice

learning in their teacher education: (a) connecting critical texts with field experiences; (b) engaging in critical conversations with peers and mentors; and (c) seeking social justice mentors.

### **The First Step: Connecting Critical Texts with Field Experiences**

In the final pages of *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy* (2006), Jones urged teachers to “(d)o one tiny thing. And then do another. And another. And suddenly you will find yourself habitually reading and rewriting the world in new and powerful ways—but the first step must be taken” (p. 162). The first step for many of my literacy methods students was to think differently about their future students and critically read the world in new and powerful ways. For participants in this study, the first step included meeting weekly with an elementary-aged student to observe and practice literacy in action. Pre-service teachers planned literacy engagements, such as shared reading or writing activities, with one elementary-aged student each week, then wrote reflectively about these interactions in weekly field journals to connect experiences to course readings. In an example from a weekly field journal, Natasha connected her work with Miguel, a Hispanic second-grade student, with a reading from Igoa (1995) about “The Phenomenon of Uprooting.” Natasha wrote:

It has been a constant for each of our visits, everything we talk about...he tells a story about how the belief, behavior, or habit is different in Mexico...He also referred to reading as “[State City] stuff,” as opposed to “Mexico stuff.” While Miguel was born in the United States, this particular aspect of his life is similar to that of the behavior discussed in Igoa’s chapter “The Phenomenon of Uprooting.” The author references Wickes’ work that, “Establishes that children are deeply involved in the psychological attitude of their parents; what happens, then, if their parents language, values, culture, and traditions are different from the language, culture, and traditions of the host country or the children’s peers?” (p.46) In listening to his stories about his family, (i.e. taking trips to the library, going to church, celebrating birthdays, and hanging out with friends) I get the impression that he has an overall positive home life, but I think it’s always viewed as a separation between home/Mexico and outside of home/America to the point that he feels the need to validate it to people other than his family; prove that it’s not inferior to the mainstream culture.

Natasha’s father immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe, and learned English as a second language as an elementary-aged student. Natasha often spoke of her father’s

experiences as meaningful to her own experiences as a learner and as a pre-service teacher. Natasha quickly took up a social justice identity in her weekly field journals, and voiced her perspective in many in-class discussions as well as in later individual and focus group interviews.

### **The Second Step: Engaging in Critical Conversations with Peers and Mentors**

In my section of literacy methods courses, pre-service teachers engaged in critical conversations about social justice texts, such as Jones (2006) and Igoa (1995). Oftentimes, the readings would offer different perspectives from the experiences of my students. Conversations would become heated as pre-service teachers discussed the perspectives in the text compared to recent interactions with children in weekly child study meetings or recalled experiences as elementary-aged students. For many of the pre-service teachers in my course, the perspectives presented in the texts and experienced in their weekly child study meetings differed from their own remembered experiences as elementary students. Primarily, these differences were associated with race, gender, and social class. One pre-service teacher, Emily, shared that she recently discovered that she and her child study student, Tiffany, were both from a large Midwest city. Emily quickly started to share her experiences in an effort to connect with Tiffany. Emily reported that Tiffany looked at her and said, "Your city doesn't sound like my city." As Emily reflected on this interaction with her peers in the literacy methods course, she said that during the conversation, it hadn't occurred to her that she and Tiffany might have different experiences even though they had lived in geographical proximity to each other. Emily lived in a predominantly White and middle-class northern suburb; Tiffany lived in an urban neighborhood within the city that was predominately Black with high rates of poverty. Tiffany's family moved from the city for more job opportunities and less violence, and Emily temporarily moved to go to college and had positive memories of living in the city. Eight-year-old Tiffany did not want to return to the city; Emily did.

The semester following my literacy methods course, Katy was enrolled in a math methods course, and often contrasted the math methods course with the literacy methods course. In a small group interview, Ava and Katy recalled how the conversations in my literacy methods courses created spaces to engage deeply in educational topics with their peers from various perspectives. Katy noted that the opportunity to share her perspective, as well as hear different perspectives from her classmates, made a difference in her learning about educational and literacy issues related to diversity. Katy credited me, as the course instructor, for creating an environment conducive to student sharing and reflection. Katy and Ava described the course discussions from my literacy methods courses as critical to developing their professional identities. Katy compared the literacy course memory to her current course, math methods, and shared that the math course was a less conducive environment for critical conversations. Ava echoed Katy's perspective that the math methods environment did not provide the same space for pre-service teachers to share their perspectives in critical discussions due to perceived time constraints. Katy added that the instructor was also not "open to people's concepts" as one more reason the environment wasn't the same.

Katy: I do give credit to you [the researcher] for setting up a classroom where it was okay to disagree. I think being able to do that helps the conversation and people [to hear different perspectives]. I know there were times where I disagreed, but I never felt like it hindered my relationships.

Ava: Right.

Katy: Being able to really, really [discuss]. Like talking about one side of abortion. You never see both sides of it.

Ava: That's really important. That's where I'm like, "Oh I didn't see it that way," but I'm not sure my position has changed. We all walked out and we were fine.

Katy: That's not a bad thing [to disagree]; we want to be immersed in [controversial topics in education]. I respected that we were able to do that in that class.

Researcher: Do you feel you don't have those opportunities in other classes?

Katy: [Having deep conversations] doesn't lend itself to other classes like math.

Ava: I think that environment could be okay, but he has such a strict time schedule.

Katy: He's not very open to other people's concepts.

Being "open to other people's concepts" and adding time for discussions are crucial elements when making space for differing perspectives in education; neither of these elements were available in the math methods course, and shut down the possibility for critical discussions.

### **The Third Step: Seeking Social Justice Mentors**

Also, during the semester following my literacy methods course, each participant enrolled in a classroom management class coupled with an 8-hour-per-week practicum field experience. The classroom management course was intended to complement the practicum field experience, and vice versa. However, each participant reported that Pat, the practicum coordinator, and Jan, the classroom management instructor, fell short of actively engaging pre-service teachers in reflection about managing classrooms or practicing teaching in a classroom. Each participant reported that Pat and Jan lacked a crucial element in the course curriculum: a critical perspective. In particular, Natasha shared that Pat and Jan did not offer opportunities for pre-service teachers to reflect critically about their classroom management learning, nor did they encourage "thinking for yourself" about complex educational topics, such as engaging students in learning. For Natasha, as well as the other pre-service teachers in this study, this was upsetting. Consequently, this negatively impacted Natasha's perception of the College of Education. The following is an excerpt from an individual interview with Natasha:

Before I was thinking, "College of Education: love it, love it." I still do, but then this semester is like, "I don't like you, Pat and Jan." They seem so old-fashioned. Not old-fashioned; they've promoted the least amount of thinking for yourself. They seem the least invested in our becoming our own teachers. They want us to be just like them and I don't want that.

Instead, Natasha challenged herself to reflect about the practices she observed in her practicum experience, how she attempted social justice pedagogies in her practicum classroom, and how she might better serve her students as an educator.



In their final semester at MU, each pre-service teacher began student-teaching in an elementary classroom. Ava and Katy reported that they built positive relationships with their classroom teachers and university supervisors. They reported feeling supported and encouraged to try out their teacher education learning in the classroom. However, for Natasha, neither relationship was positive and resulted in frustration and insecurity. In particular, Natasha did not connect with her classroom cooperating teacher, Karen. Natasha perceived Karen's perspective on students who lived in apartments or who were English Language Learners (ELL) as negative and condescending. This frustrated Natasha since she currently lived in an apartment with her parents, and her father had been an ELL student when he was in elementary school. In the absence of a social justice teacher educator mentor in her student teaching setting, Natasha sought out family and friends to serve as mentors. Although Natasha perceived her student-teaching community to be socially conservative due to factors associated with race, language, and class, she voiced her frustrations while out for coffee near her student teaching community:

Our priest and his wife live in the same apartments as my parents. We were having a really liberal conversation; liberal for where we live. We're just really comfortable with him...And I was referring to how [my cooperating teacher Karen] talks about apartment kids and ELL kids [in a negative way], and I was saying, "I'm an apartment kid and my dad would have been an ELL kid."

Natasha questioned the perspective of her cooperating teacher, Karen, and offered a different perspective from her own family experiences. Although Natasha shared her perspective with family, friends, and me, she did not share her perspective with Karen. Instead, Natasha continually disconnected from Karen and distanced herself in the same way she distanced herself from Pat and Jan by seeking outside mentors to sustain her social justice learning.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Findings indicate that the pre-service teachers in this study want social justice experiences in their teacher education programs, and when these experiences are not offered, pre-service teachers seek opportunities to sustain their learning. Findings point to the need for

teacher educators to design course curricula to sustain social justice learning experiences during lapses in future teacher education experiences. Based on these findings, I provide three suggestions for teacher educators to sustain social justice learning throughout the teacher education program: (1) provide pre-service teachers a supportive context to engage critically in discussions with their peers; (2) apply social justice pedagogies accompanied by written reflections about experiences; and (3) serve as mentors committed to social justice practices.

### **Context for Critical Reflection with Peers**

Teacher educators should create supportive environments for pre-service teachers to engage in critical discussions about complex issues in education. Teacher educators should facilitate and mediate the discussions to ensure pre-service teacher sharing remains productive and considerate (Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Mills, 2009; Olmedo, 1997; Ticknor, 2012; Ticknor & Cavendish, in press). Katy reported that in later courses, “instead of being constructive [the debate] gets mean” when instructors did not create environments conducive to disagreements. Teacher educators need to set a productive tone for critical discussions and model reflective sharing to allow for disagreement without hurt feelings. Teacher educators can model active listening, position students as knowledgeable, and facilitate tense conversations by encouraging students to explain their positions with examples, literature, or experiences. Findings indicate that creating classroom communities, organizing students for collaborative learning, and utilizing open-ended questions (Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Olmedo, 1997; Ticknor, 2012; Ticknor & Cavendish, in press) provided environments conducive for productive and reflective sharing between pre-service teachers. For participants in this study, in-class discussions served as “lingering conversations” (Ticknor, 2012, p. 155), or influential discussions that continued their learning when critical perspectives were absent in subsequent teacher education curricula. Additionally, the focus group meetings served as continued space for critical reflections with peers about their teaching experiences. When Katy reflected on the focus group meetings, she stated, “Like Natasha said, ‘we feed off of each other’” when

discussing their experiences and perspectives. Feistritzer, et al. (2011) reported a similar finding that 75% of teachers noted “discussions with fellow teachers” as the most effective aspect of their teacher education programs (p. 30).

### **Social Justice Applications with Connections to Critical Texts**

Teacher educators should support pre-service teacher approximations with social justice pedagogies, such as Natasha’s approximation, by carefully selecting critical texts to guide field experience approximations, conversations, and written reflections (Olmedo, 1997). By coupling reading and diverse field experience interactions, pre-service teachers in this study tried social justice perspectives in their teaching identities. The literacy methods child study meetings with subsequent field journals served as an opportunity to approximate social justice teaching methods, and then connect the approximations with course readings. Critical discussions should link field experiences with readings to interrupt assumptions and stable presentations of social class, race, gender, and ability in published texts on a continual basis. Instructors should purposefully select field experience placements to encourage multiple and fluid perspectives about linguistically and culturally diverse students (Lopez, 2011) and encourage diverse classroom experiences by pre-service teachers (Gomez, Strage, Knutson-Miller, & Garcia-Nevarez, 2009).

### **Social Justice Mentors and Field Experiences**

Finally, teacher educators should serve as social justice mentors to pre-service teachers during field experiences. As the students’ former instructor and interested listener, I served as a constant reminder of our course discussions about social justice pedagogies. By modeling and encouraging critical reflection (Bates, Ramirez, & Drits, 2009; Olmedo, 2009), my prompting questions continued to linger in later reflections. Long after the literacy methods courses ended and our weekly interactions ceased, Ava reported that my critical perspective as an educator continued to pervade her thinking and prompted her to think deeply about her teaching. Ava stated, “I hear stuff that you say in my head all the time.” Not only can teacher educators serve

as mentors in the absence of social justice perspectives, so can critical texts. Texts, such as *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy* (Jones, 2006), can serve as mentors, or a continued perspective, when physical mentors are not present (Ticknor, 2012). Ava reported that while packing her books at the end of the semester, she “couldn’t send them home. I wanted to keep them here. Especially the Jones book.” Ava continued to rely on particular books, such as *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy* (Jones, 2006), to serve as social justice mentors about sociocultural education throughout the teacher education program.

### **Limitations**

As with all research, this study should be viewed through a lens of limitations. The sample size was purposefully small, and making broad generalizations toward all pre-service teachers is not the author’s intent. Rather, by focusing on a small group of students, this study allowed me to become deeply involved with participants over three semesters of college. In a shorter study, the depth of the interviews would not have been the same, nor would the sharing have been so rich.

Additionally, the shifting role of the author from instructor to researcher influenced the data collected, and the insight into the literacy methods course conversations. Had I not been the participants’ former instructor, I may not have been able to be a participant observer in the course. The conversations might have been different had another instructor taught the course. Additionally, since I had been their previous instructor, participants may have sought my approval when sharing their experiences.

### **Conclusions**

This article examined the ways in which four White female pre-service teachers took up, maintained, and sustained social justice identities in their teacher education programs. The findings point to the ways in which pre-service teachers actively sought resources, such as texts, peers, and mentors, to continue critical literacy learning during subsequent social justice learning lapses in teacher education experiences. Teacher educators can support pre-service

teachers in this journey by offering opportunities to engage in critical discussions, reflect about teaching in diverse field experiences, and access social justice mentors during lapses in teacher education curricula. By supporting pre-service teachers to maintain social justice identities, we can prepare future teachers to *sustain* professional identities that seek to be inclusive of their future students.

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