

INTRODUCTION

TEACHING TEACHERS:

CRITICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN TEACHER ED PROGRAMS

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**COMMITTING TO TEACHER ED IS COMMITTING
TO A CRITICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK**

Our (Dana and Erin) doctoral program emphasized cultural foundations of education and critical pedagogy, placing social justice education at its core. Not only do we consider ourselves critical pedagogues, our critical social justice mindset is at the core of who we both are as human beings, as scholars, and as educators. As doctoral students, and now as an assistant professor (Dana) and a special assistant to the Guilford College president (Erin), we have engaged in countless conversations about the marrying of critical pedagogy and critical social justice education. In particular, we have often sought out the best practices for teaching pre-service teacher candidates through a critical social justice framework. Our conversations led us to an existing and extensive array of strong research regarding teaching social justice in teacher education preparation programs (e.x., Picower, 2012; Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillian, 2009; McDonald, 2005; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Nieto, 2000), as well as into conversations with other critical pedagogues with similar critical social justice mindsets.

Dana has taught many preservice teachers, engaging them in critical self reflection as well as designing anti-oppressive curricula in her work with the Educator Collaborative. Erin's most recent work at Guilford involves working with students, faculty, and administrators on co-creating environments and pedagogies (both in and out of the classroom) that reflect the social justice commitments of the College as a Quaker institution. We believe education to be a locus for social change and social justice. Therefore, how future teachers are prepared to teach their future students remains critical. Committing to a critical social justice framework requires the exploration of not only the larger societal factors that contribute to the climate of schools but also our own values, beliefs, and biases. This will help us better understand what we, as well as our students, bring to the classroom. This special issue is focused on these commitments to a critical justice framework for future teachers, with a critical hope towards transformation and justice.

While there are some teacher education programs across the United States that include a social justice component within their mission statements and curriculum, many only have one curricular component designed to engage these issues. These components, however, usually take the form of what we call a "diversity soup" course - that course where students learn (the first time, for some) about privilege, oppression, and power as it relates the system of education all in one semester. Sometimes, teacher education programs include arbitrary social justice strands, where all courses are supposed to have some link to social justice issues in education; generally, we see this in mention or masked as "service learning," rather than in critical study and application. Other times, teacher education programs offer a social justice-related strand, skillfully labeled as, "urban education" or, most commonly, "diversity education." In most instances, we found that, if social justice in teacher education programs was a strand, it was a requirement, but came with little to no support and accountability.

Many teacher education programs place a strong emphasis on subject-content knowledge with little or no critical examination of the purpose of education or the role of teachers. Christine Sleeter has written extensively on the issue of pre-service teacher education, particu-

larly as it relates to developing a social justice framework and observes that, “schools teach young people not to pursue their own questions, but rather to pursue questions defined by the teacher and the textbook” (2004, p. 93). This belief is often reified within teacher education programs, where the focus is on subject mastery and classroom management. Teachers are expected to remain apolitical. However, as Patrick Jenlink and Karen Embry Jenlink (2005), editors of *Portraits of Teacher Preparation*, observe, the significance of teacher preparedness to not only teach in a diverse community, but also to work for justice requires that “social justice is not an add-on to a curriculum— whether for the teacher preparation or public school classroom” (p. 23). What could teacher preparation really look like, beyond the ability to train teachers to function in the high stakes era of testing and results-driven decisions?

The work of Bree Picower (2012) addresses this question as she engages her students to, as she writes, “question taken-for-granted assumptions about power, privilege and various forms of oppression and how these impact education and the educational outcomes of their future students” (p.2). This approach jars the status quo, asking students to critically examine the heretofore unexamined. It is a framework of questioning that leads to a disruption of what Kevin Kumashiro (2004) labels the “commonsensical definitions of good teaching” (pp.14-15). Pushing students to move towards anti-oppressive teaching must form a critical framework of teacher education programs.

To better understand the landscape of teacher preparation for this issue, we evaluated selected teacher education programs at colleges and universities across the United States. Although we are suspect of “rankings” of any kind, we did reference the 2013 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings on the top-rated schools of education to identify a sample. We looked at five programs from their evaluation because it does offer a common reference point and the rankings are seen as recognizing “quality” in programs and conceivably might attract future students.

Programs claim, within their mission statements and program materials, some level of commitment to education as a tool for social justice, using words and phrases like, “just democracy,” “active citi-

zens,” equitable society,” “just and sustainable world,” to name a few. However, within most programs studied, there remains a disconnect between those ambitious words and the realities of required curricula and classrooms. Most of what comprises teacher education programs is the curriculum of repetition about the purpose of education and school, with coursework focused on subject knowledge and “professional practice” like classroom management. Education for social justice requires interrogating the status quo, resulting in crisis moments and spaces for reflection and growth.

This special edition was born out of this research and these conversations, and our desire to create a space for dialogue about the importance of a critical social justice framework in teacher ed programs; what teacher ed programs with a critical social justice framework can be; and the impact of framing teacher ed programs with critical pedagogy and critical social justice. Like the thoughtful work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2004), our aim was for this space to bring a deeper understanding to “what it means to put into practice locally and theorize more publically a commitment to teacher education that meets the needs of the increasingly racially and culturally diverse population and is committed to equity and social justice” (p. xviii). We were interested in bringing together conversations that are happening around teaching social justice in teacher preparation programs in their efforts towards the “ethical formation” of future teachers.

The spectacular group of contributing authors brought so much more to this special issue than we could have ever dreamed. They brought us - and now you, the readers - into their personal stories, critical conversations, remarkable experiences, and innovative classrooms, where critical pedagogy and critical social justice collide in teacher ed programs.

OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL EDITION

The articles in this special edition bring together three distinct places where critical pedagogy and critical social justice can work together to situate teacher ed programs with a critical social justice framework: ourselves, our students, and our classrooms. While each piece is placed under a theme, we assert that all of the themes weave throughout each piece to some degree.

SITUATING OURSELVES WITHIN CRITICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

The authors of the articles in this section (Tafari, Ricks, & Oates; Burke; and Zilonka) remind us that when we situate ourselves within this work, we need to be both reflective and reflexive of our personal journeys of becoming educators of/for social justice. They encourage us to question what critical social justice means to us and what it looks like in our everyday lives as individuals, as scholars, and as educators.

In “Teaching Social Justice AIN’T Easy: Stories of HBCU Faculty Who Walk the Talk,” Tafari, Ricks, & Oates remind readers that in order to teach about social justice, we must embody dispositions of social justice activists educators. The authors set forth with two goals: (1) to provide voices of “authentic experience of understanding how to work within schools and communities to effect change for a more inclusive society,” and (2) to “spark conversation...about what HBCU faculty can and should be doing to ensure that we are, first and foremost, walking the talk and truly preparing our students to become change agents” (pg. 17). The authors accomplish these goals (and then some) through their powerful and personal autoethnographic stories of becoming social justice-oriented individuals.

Burke’s visually appealing piece, “Tremblining on the Precipice of Possibility: A Story About Becoming a Teacher Educator for Social Justice,” is a place for her to share her personal journey through examining her own understanding of equity, justice, and diversity. She uses this examination to describe how her journey “translated into teaching and supervision in teacher education” (pg. 39). Burke uses imagery to intensity metaphor, communal sharing, foolishness, and a dialectic of critique and hope throughout, as she takes us through her creation of an illustrated story to show what it can mean to facilitate Freire’s (1994) notion of “conscientization” as it relates to teaching social justice in teacher education.

In a thoughtfully interwoven autobiographical and pedagogical framework, “My Accent, Myself: Transforming Liabilities Related to Otherness into Assets,” Zilonka reflects on how she is impacted by and how her work as an instructor is impacted by her identities of privilege and otherness. Radical feminism and liberatory pedagogy ground criti-

cal pedagogy for her work as she considers several different aspects of her life and her teaching. Specifically, Zilonka critically examines her pedagogy, students, classroom spaces, and academic space to move through an understanding of what it means for her to teach social justice in a teacher ed program as an international student.

SITUATING OUR STUDENTS WITHIN CRITICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE (IN) EDUCATION

Situating our students within critical social justice (in) education means that we look deeper into our students' backgrounds, entry points, and understandings, and into their misconceptions and perceptions of critical social justice, and the authors of these next articles (Murdock & Hamel; Morrison) create pathways for us to engage in this work. Both pieces reflect the authors' observations of their students engagement with critical self reflective practices as well as their struggles to implement pedagogies of social justice.

If 83% of teachers in the United States are white (nces.ed.gov, 2007), what kinds of intentional critical practices and pedagogies are offered to students in teacher education programs to engage in critical self-reflection? Murdock and Hamel begin to address this question as they examine mindsets and biases of preservice teachers, focused on preparing them to engage diverse classrooms, to teach mindfully and to adopt a culturally relevant pedagogy in their piece "I Would Quit my Job:" Unpacking Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Culture and Diversity." Their study of preservice teachers reveals the students' continued need for the practice of critical self-reflection and unpacking culture both their own and those of their future/current students. The authors discuss the disconnect between theory and practice for students as they engage issues of diversity. For example, some resisted the idea of teaching early grades of elementary school students about bias and discrimination, writing "the appropriateness of including issues of bias and discrimination in early childhood curriculum, who should teach issues of bias and discrimination, and the ways in which diverse perspectives should be taught" (p.100). Their study offers insight into the challenges of stressing critical self-reflective practices for preservice teachers throughout a curriculum, not in just one course, reminding us to think about how teachers know themselves so they can engage their

future students and families from a value-added perspective, rather than from dominant culture influenced deficit thinking.

While many articles in this issue focus on pedagogical and curricular frameworks within teacher education programs, Morrison reveals the realities of conflict between ideals and practice for one of her former students. In “Never in my Life Have I Learned to Teach to a Program and Not to the Kids Sitting in Front of Me: Critical Pedagogy Meets Restrictive Educational Contexts,” Morrison uses personal narrative to share the experiences of Rose, now a new teacher. Rose is a teacher dedicated to critical pedagogy within her classroom, yet finds herself and her beliefs challenged by a school-administered infrastructure in the form of tests and Direct Instruction. Rose begins her teaching career believing “I can’t change the world, but I can somehow make it better” (Page 122) to “I feel like I’m unlearning what I learned in college. It’s awful.” (p.126). Morrison asks us to consider how critical pedagogy in practice is modeled for our newest teachers and how to operate effectively within restrictive structures.

SITUATING OUR CLASSROOMS AS SPACES FOR CRITICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

The authors of these articles (Hart; Alarcón; and Boyd, LaGarry, & Cain) encourage us to view our classrooms as spaces where critical social justice work can and should happen. They share with us ways to re-imagine our lessons, our courses, and our entire programs through a critical social justice lens.

In “Social Justice Pedagogy, Deconstruction & Teaching *What Makes a Baby*,” Hart suggests a pedagogical approach beyond what she terms “additive approaches to diversity” within teacher education programs, instead focusing on the application of deconstruction and critical literacy of a particular text. Incorporating this approach offers opportunities for students to critically examine and question social norms in a specific context, ultimately working towards an anti-oppressive pedagogy. A critical reading of *What Makes a Baby* serves as an exercise where students learn to interrogate normative culture as well as become critically aware of oppressive practices and structures. As future educators, Hart believes this approach to be quite significant,

writing, “As facilitators of knowledge production, it is vital that they learn to think expansively about understandings of human experience in order to make life more livable for all.” (p. 142) Moving towards a deconstructive and critical approach, students will understand the practical application of a theoretical framework, one that demands critical examination of normative structures and practices.

Through an action research approach, Alarcón encourages a critical “rethinking [of] our practices with the goal of truly modeling critical pedagogy as a method for creating equitable learning spaces for all students” (pg. 168) in her article, “Enacting Critical Pedagogy in an Elementary Methods Course: A Move Toward Re-Imagining Teacher Education.” Alarcón shares relevant and honest moments in her own teaching practice during an elementary social studies methods course to answer her own question, “How can we encourage elementary teacher candidates to reject deficit thinking?” She astutely positions community building as a way to critically think about this question and as a way to enact of critical pedagogy for critical social justice work in teacher ed classrooms.

In “Moving from Self to System: A Framework for Social Justice Centered on Issues and Action,” Boyd, LaGarry, & Cain present an approach to teaching that shifts away from traditional methods for diversity - and social justice-related courses, and encompasses more organic and comprehensive components, including: (1) using student autobiographies, (2) organizing coursework by “topics of concern for dismantling inequity,” (3) critical analyses of media, (4) re-conceptualization of social justice within content areas, and (5) creating and implement social action projects. The authors “demonstrate in theory and practice, providing tangible examples, ways to accomplish the work set before us” (pg. 186) of creating teacher ed courses framed by critical social justice.

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