



“Teachers are works in progress”: A mixed methods study of teaching residents’ beliefs and articulations of teaching for social justice[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher candidates beliefs of teaching for social justice are examined.
- Candidates shifted their ideas of teaching for social justice during preparation.
- Candidates’ beliefs generally held strong beliefs about teaching for social justice.
- Further research is needed to explore teaching practice of novice teachers.

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ABSTRACT

Teacher candidates’ beliefs about teaching for social justice affect the ways in which they act with students, schools, and communities. There is a growing body of research on teacher candidates’ beliefs of teaching for social justice, however there is limited research on larger samples over the course of teacher preparation. This mixed method study examines the beliefs and articulations of teaching for social justice of two cohorts of teaching residents who completed an urban teacher residency program. Findings suggest that residents developed nuanced ways of articulating and generally left the program endorsing ideas related to teaching for social justice.

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1. Introduction

Across the United States and internationally, many teacher education programs express goals of preparing teachers to teach for social justice (Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2010; Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Kaputska, Howell, Clayton & Thomas, 2009; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Whipp, 2013). In fact, almost ten years ago, Zeichner (2006) argued, “it has become almost impossible to find a college- or university-based teacher education program today that does not have an emphasis on preparing teachers for social justice” (p. 73). Although definitions vary, several common goals of teacher education for social justice include

preparing teachers to promote P12 students’ learning and enhance their life chances by challenging school and societal inequities (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Ayers, Hunt & Quinn, 1998; Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; Cochran-Smith, 1999, 2004, 2008; Darling-Hammond, French & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Michelli & Keiser, 2005; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner, 2003, 2006, 2009).

Along with this prevalence, teacher education programs have applied “teaching for social justice” to a variety practices and experiences (Castro, 2010; Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Shakman, & Terrell, 2009; Whipp, 2013). Some of these include courses, field experiences, and assignments that explore and analyze notions of justice, the lived experiences of students who are affiliated with particular (historically marginalized) groups, institutional and sociopolitical conditions of schooling, and the relationship among students, teachers, schools, and broader communities (Agarwal et al., 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2008; McDonald, 2008). These experiences are often designed to unpack, disrupt, and challenge

[☆] The quote in this title is taken from a participant’s words, and we use this quote to honor participants’ voices in this study.

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preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching, learning, schools and society (Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow, & Mitescu, 2008; Villegas, 2007).

Teachers' beliefs and articulations of social justice are critical components and "powerful mediators" of teaching practice (Cochran-Smith, 2008; Cochran-Smith, Reagan & Shakman, 2009). They serve as the filters through which teachers view and interact with students, communities, classrooms, and institutions (Milner, 2005; Villegas, 2007). Accordingly, it is essential to examine beliefs and conceptions of social justice within a teacher education program before any systematic change is to occur (Talbert-Johnson, 2006), and to explore the ways in which teacher education programs can support and examine preservice teachers' beliefs and articulations of teaching for social justice before they enter the classroom.

Currently, there is limited literature on whether and how beliefs and articulations of social justice change across the duration of a teacher education program (e.g., Enterline et al., 2008). Our study intends to contribute to the literature through a mixed methods analysis of these beliefs and articulations using multiple data sources prior to, during, and at the end of a teacher education program. We contend that such an analysis provides insight into preservice teachers' conceptualizations of social justice, and sheds light on multiple opportunities for preservice teachers to grapple with and understand teaching for social justice.

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to take an in-depth examination of teaching residents'¹ articulations on and beliefs about teaching for social justice in a 14-month urban teacher residency program with an explicit social justice mission. Specifically, we examine how two cohorts of teaching residents articulated and responded to ideas related to teaching for social justice over the course of the program. We define articulations of social justice as the ways in which teaching residents think, talk about, and describe teaching for social justice prior to and during the residency program. We operationalize beliefs as the ways in which residents endorsed ideas related to teaching for social justice at the end of the program.

In this study, while we view beliefs and articulations of social justice as integral components of teaching practice (Cochran-Smith, 2008), we do not examine the enactment of social justice practices in the classroom, or the impact of the residency program on residents' beliefs about teaching for social justice. Rather, we investigate the journey of how residents make sense of and become advocates for social justice through their articulations and beliefs about teaching for social justice.

2. Teacher education for social justice

Within and outside of the field, "teacher education for social justice" has been criticized for being under-theorized and not recognizing or drawing on the historical, political, or philosophical roots of social justice (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Grant & Agosto, 2008; North, 2006, 2008). In response to this criticism, this study draws on theories of justice in education that explicitly acknowledge and examine the historical underpinnings of social justice outside of and within education (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Cochran-Smith, 2008; McDonald, 2005; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; North, 2006, 2008). These theories highlight the competing notions of recognition and redistribution (North, 2006, 2008), and the tensions between individual and institutional oppression (McDonald, 2005; Young, 1990).

¹ Using the language of the program, preservice teachers are referred to as "teaching residents".

Acknowledging these tensions, this study draws on Cochran-Smith's (2008) "theory of teacher education for social justice," that outlines coherent and interrelated theories of justice, practice, and teacher education. Specifically, we draw on Cochran-Smith's theory of practice that conceptualizes teaching for social justice as more than skills, strategies and activities, but also beliefs, advocacy, and involvement with families and other educational stakeholders in the larger community as a framework for our study. In particular, these beliefs or "interpretive frames" include an understanding that teachers hold asset-based perspectives on students' cultural, linguistic, experiential backgrounds (Oakes & Lipton, 1999); acknowledge students' "multiple identities and life histories structured by race, class, culture, and other aspects of existing societal systems of privilege and oppression" (Cochran-Smith, 2008, p. 17); and are change agents who develop and enact academically rigorous curricula for their students (Agarwal et al., 2010; Whipp, 2013). Accordingly, to pursue social justice in education, teachers must "work to situate pedagogical practices within analyses of structural inequality and prepare their students to understand injustice on this level" (Agarwal et al., 2010, p. 238). In other words, learning to teach for social justice is a process in which individuals explore, grapple with, and seek to address tensions that are present in current educational structures and practices.

3. Literature review

There is a growing body of empirical research that analyzes teacher candidates' beliefs, conceptions, and dispositions about teaching for social justice in national and international contexts. Moreover, the number of articles that discuss issues of equity and social justice in *Teaching and Teacher Education* has increased in the last ten years (Kaur, 2012). For example, a recent body of literature examines the role of teacher conceptions around social justice in multiple contexts such as the UK (Boylan, 2009; Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Farnsworth, 2010), Canada (Carson & Johnston, 2001; Carson, 2005), Australia (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010; Mills, 2012), and the U.S. (Frederick, Cave, & Perencevich, 2010; de Freitas, 2008). However, the research base is overwhelmingly small-scale and focuses on short-term field experiences, courses, or assignments—all of which may have limited lasting effects on prospective teachers' beliefs and attitudes (Cochran-Smith, Gleeson, & Mitchell, 2010; Hollins & Torres Guzman, 2005; McDonald, 2008).

Recent longitudinal studies have examined candidates' experiences and beliefs about teaching for social justice over the course of a teacher preparation program or instructional initiative (e.g., Athanases & Oliveira, 2007; Au & Blake, 2003; Bennett, 2002; Bennett, Cole & Thompson, 2000; Gomez, Black, & Allen, 2007; Johnston-Parsons, Lee, & Thomas, 2007; Levine-Rasky, 2001; McDonald, 2005, 2008; Milner, 2008; Mosley & Rogers, 2011; Thomas & Vanderhaar, 2008). Some studies offer rich and nuanced perspectives of candidates' beliefs and practices of teaching for social justice, and acknowledge the complex relationship among candidates' backgrounds and lived experiences, and teacher education programs' visions, coursework, field and community-based experiences. Overall, this body of research suggests that programs with coherent visions and embedded opportunities to explore teaching for social justice "are more effective than fragmented programs" (Whipp, 2013, p. 455) in changing beliefs and promoting teaching practices related to teaching for social justice.

However, across the existing research, we could not locate any studies that examine multiple cohorts of teacher candidates or the variation among a larger sample of teacher candidates' beliefs and articulations of teaching for social justice at multiple points in time during the preservice period. Recognizing the complexity of

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