

Original Paper

“That’s Much Easier Said than Done”: The Realities of Social Justice Pedagogy in Schools

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Abstract

Teaching for critical social justice is an attempt by classroom teachers to promote equity within their classrooms. Researchers have analyzed the impact of preservice teachers’ readiness to address social justice issues in their classrooms upon exiting their teacher education programs. However, despite reports of already practicing K-12 teachers’ attempts to teach for social justice in their classrooms, there is little connection to teacher education programs. This postcritical qualitative study addresses the research gap by highlighting the understandings and experiences of four intern teachers simultaneously enrolled in a teacher education program while participating in a critical social justice focus group. Findings from the critical social justice focus group revealed intern teachers’ understandings of critical social justice included: (1) embracing a critical awareness, (2) advocacy: “it’s about the students”, and (3) praxis defeat.

Keywords

critical social justice, social justice teacher education, postcritical ethnography, intern teachers

1. Introduction

As both a former elementary teacher and now a teacher educator, I have worked to understand how teacher education can better prepare future educators to teach for social justice and promote equity within classrooms (Note 1). In my own experience as a racially white, ethnically Latina, cis-hetero female from a privileged middle-class background, my commitment to social justice is embedded in both my teaching and research. Preparing teachers to effectively address the needs of marginalized youth is a top priority for those actively *teaching* for social justice. Throughout this article, I align myself specifically with the term Critical Social Justice (CSJ) which, “recognize[s] that society is stratified (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far reaching ways along social group lines that

include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. CSJ recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. xviii).

This study involves four intern teachers who worked full time in the classroom while simultaneously completing requirements in a Master’s of Education program. Unlike preservice teachers, who are studying to be certified teachers, the intern teachers in this study had already completed a Bachelor’s degree (some with a minor in education), and while taking graduate-level educational courses in the evenings, they assumed the full responsibility of a classroom teacher under the guidance of a mentor teacher during the day. While this is not the exact same role as a first-year teacher, the interns did hold the responsibility of creating weekly lesson plans, undergoing teacher evaluations, attending faculty/IEP meetings/school events, and assessment of students. The mentor teacher guided the intern throughout these processes with a goal to ultimately establish a co-teaching relationship. It is important to note that while the official evaluations and test scores were still tied to the mentor teacher, the responsibilities of the intern teachers are so involved, that should they decide to teach their first year in the interning county, they qualify for year-two on the pay scale.

This study seeks to illuminate the intern teachers’ voices to shed light on their experiences and understandings related to CSJ while in the classroom. The research rests on the assumption that teacher education is powerful (Darling-Hamming, 2006) and holds the potential for teacher candidates to learn about social justice issues including race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and dis/ability. Much of the research related to preparing future teachers to be successful in diverse school contexts generally focuses on the short term and is only in the university setting. Such research is often collected while students are enrolled in semester long courses or during follow- up interviews or surveys (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2011; Easter, Schultz, Neyhart, & Rack, 1999; Martin & Williams-Dixon, 1994). Little has been written exploring teachers’ relationships between CSJ education and what they do once they enter the classroom (Ullucci, 2010). To address my goal, I conducted a qualitative study with four interns during the 2011-2012 school year. Throughout six monthly focus groups during the school year, I explored the ways in which issues related to social justice were addressed throughout their teacher education and arose in the way they described their students and classrooms.

2. Literature Review

Infusing social justice topics throughout a teacher’s education (which extends beyond a degree-program) is powerful and holds the potential for teacher candidates and practicing teachers to better understand their own positionalities, and how these impacts students across race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). There have been studies addressing teacher candidates’ reflections and ideological shifts regarding diversity while in teacher education courses (Correa, Hudson, & Hayes, 2004; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001). These studies demonstrate how

preservice teachers, specifically white teachers, often hold deficit views and lower expectations toward diverse students initially, but there are possibilities for change. The dispositions and experiences preservice teachers come into a teacher education program with can greatly affect how they respond to courses related to social justice (Amos, 2011; Garmon, 2004/2005; Pohan, 1996). However, the research suggests that there are possibilities for changes in beliefs through teacher education and professional development in efforts to effectively teach diverse populations. It is imperative that teacher preparation programs include coursework and experiences for that allow for preservice teachers to embrace culturally relevant education with an emphasis toward CSJ if we expect teachers to be able to meet the needs of marginalized youth (Aronson, 2016; Dover, 2013).

There are some examples of research that moved beyond the traditional teacher education trajectory for scholars who have organized spaces for continuing critical reflection. Duncan-Andrade (2004) organized critical teacher inquiry groups intended to support a group of 37 K-5 teachers working at urban schools in South Central Los Angeles. Using a Freirean framework to promote dialogue, reflection and praxis, Duncan-Andrade facilitated a discussion of readings that related to issues of social and economic inequality facing their schools. He found by creating this space, the school culture shifted to where critical teacher practices were “normalized, rather than marginalized” (p. 346). This positively highlights the impact that facilitating critical discussions post-teacher education can have in school settings.

The Social Justice Critical Inquiry Project (CIP) was a two-year program piloted at New York University to create space to support preservice teachers as they transitioned into their first years teaching in NYC schools. Participants in the CIP were part of a 14-month Master’s program that began with the teacher educator, Bree Picower, who taught them in a multicultural education course. Through their participation in the CIP, the teachers were able to share the importance support played in their ability to *own* their social justice orientations and how to navigate the political space of school. They also were able to use their knowledge in the creation of curricular projects and resources that they pooled together with other teachers across schools to create culturally relevant curriculums. Finally, the participants shared how they were pushed forward in their pursuit of teaching for social justice (Picower, 2007). In a follow-up study, Picower (2011) found that within the CIP the styles of collaboration they participated in supported their development to teach for social justice. Findings illustrated that participants were able to create spaces to model social justice education with one another. This support led to the increased ability to actually teach for social justice in the classroom once they were able to discuss prior beliefs and topics. Finally, the CIP allowed for teachers to develop leadership and mentorship skills that there were able to bring back to their classrooms.

In another study, Henning (2013) facilitated a collaborative learning group with six novice social studies teachers who had recently graduated from a socially justice-focused teacher education program. This group was focused on “developing more effective ways of resisting and transforming unjust schooling practices” (p. 123). The findings indicated that for teachers committed to issues of diversity,

democracy, and social justice collaborative-based support is necessary post-graduation.

Picower (2007/2011) and Henning's (2013) research closely aligns to the goals of this study given we know little has been written exploring teachers' relationships between learning about CSJ and praxis once they enter the classroom, and there is a need to fill in this gap with continued research (Ullucci, 2010). This current study aims to add to the research by bridging connections through understanding how intern teachers participating in a Critical Social Justice Focus Group (CSJFG), while simultaneously enrolled in graduate education courses, influenced four intern teachers' understandings and practices related to CSJ in the classroom.

3. Theoretical Framework: Social Justice Pedagogy

Carlisle, Jackson and George (2006) define social justice education as, "the conscious and reflexive blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple identity groups (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability), foster critical perspectives, and promote social action" (p. 57). As referenced above, CSJ recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. xviii). There have been ongoing debates regarding the multiple meanings of "social justice education", thus it is important to note the ways in which I refer to social justice education, fuse together the definitions of social justice education and CSJ to discuss the broader discipline of Social Justice Teacher Education (SJTE). The key words in these definitions are "inten[tion]" and "action", so with a SJTE, preservice teachers are encouraged to be in a continuous self-reflexive mode to promote social action for a more equitable world.

Central to promoting social action and encouraging teachers to become change agents is the need to question inequality and the status quo. Gutstein (2007) posits a *pedagogy of questioning* as a classroom environment with characteristics co-created by the teachers and students. Students should be comfortable in their space to pose meaningful questions, and once students begin to question, one line of questioning leads to another. This is something encouraged within a SJTE and develops the kind of "awareness, transformation action, and reflection", what Freire called praxis (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, p. 341).

Gutstein (2007) explains, "Answers and truth" are provisional and relational, and students and teachers keep this in mind as they strive to unravel complex social phenomena—such as racism—and understand their interconnections and root causes" (p. 56). Such complexities should be out and open for students to analyze and engage in multiple perspectives. Questions should be tied to actions and social movements and not just posed by the teacher. Students should feel *they can* ask their teachers questions at any time they feel it is necessary when employing a *pedagogy of questioning*.

These understandings of social justice education are purposeful in both the P-12 classroom as well as in SJTE. Aligned with Conklin's (2008) model of critical, justice-oriented teacher education, this work has mostly focused on "helping mostly white, monolingual, middle-class prospective teachers become

compassionate, successful teachers for racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students” (p. 48). Understanding the goals of SJTE was necessary in the design and organization of this study.

4. Method

This study is part of a larger ethnographic project informed by postcritical ethnography (Noblit, Murillo, & Flores, 2004). To claim a postcritical ethnographic stance, as the researcher I must be willing, not only to reveal oppression and power structures, but also critique them *and myself* throughout the research process, as well as reflect on the assumptions and frames brought to the research (Hyttén, 2004). With this in mind, my own critique of teacher education served as an impetus for the research design and creation of the CSJFG. In agreement with Matias (2015), a teacher education that does not expose preservice teachers to issues of power and oppression (particularly race, racism, and Whiteness) maintains the status quo. Through dialogue with my own students, many shared they were not discussing CSJ issues within their coursework. It was shortly after recognizing this that I decided to invite former students who had taken educational psychology with me to participate in the CSJFG.

Within postcritical ethnography, commitments to “positionality, reflexivity, objectivity, and representation” are present throughout the research design and process (Noblit et al., 2004, p. 21). I must complicate claims of objectivity as my own teaching experiences and positionality led to the organization the CSJFG around topics critical scholars have argued are crucial to working with marginalized youth, such as race, class, and sexuality (Gorski, 2009/2013; Matias, 2015). However, given the importance of representation and voice, the interns also advocated for topics of interest to them to include in our meetings (see Table 1).

Table 1. List of Readings

September 2011	October 2011	November 2011
<i>Defining CSJ</i>	<i>Critical Race Theory</i>	<i>CSJ Praxis</i>
“Youth and Social Justice in Education” by Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade <i>This introductory chapter introduces and defines social justice in education. Duncan-Andrade explains urban reform movements and how they have failed to provide quality education to poor and minority students.</i>	“Critical Race Theory, Multicultural Education, and the Hidden Curriculum of Hegemony” by Michelle Jay <i>This article explains the concept of hegemony and the hidden curriculum that continues to perpetuate inequalities in schools.</i>	“The Social Justice Education Project: A Critically Compassionate Intellectualism for Chicano/a Students” by Julio Cammarota and Augustine F. Romero. <i>This article explained how one group of educators created the The Social Justice Education Project in one school district as part of a participatory action research project. They successfully increased students’ achievement through a program focused on empowerment.</i>

February 2012	March 2012	April 2012
<i>Poverty/Classism</i>	<i>Queer Youth</i>	<i>Religion and Censorship</i>
Introduction and Conclusion from <i>Radical Possibilities</i> by Jean Anyon <i>Anyon highlights the ways in which historical inequalities continue to affect the inequalities we see today. She gives recommendations for educators as ways to combat some of these inequalities but ultimately believes schools alone cannot fix the problems.</i>	“Creating Safe Schools for Queer Youth” by Kimberly Crosier <i>This article discusses LGBT students who are at risk and how educators might advocate on their behalf and be aware of different types of sexual identification.</i>	“Social justice, democratic education and the silencing words that wound” by Barbara Applebaum <i>This article addresses dominant voices that might supersede in classroom conversations. Applebaum also addresses the power of discourse to perpetuate ideological subordination and the conflation of culture and the meaning of oppression.</i>

The data was collected during the 2011-2012 academic school year from the six, monthly focus groups held outside of their graduate classes. The guiding research questions asked:

- 1) What are intern teachers’ understandings and experiences while participating in a critical social justice focus group?
- 2) How do intern teachers conceptualize critical social justice? That is, what do they say they actually do in the classroom context? What obstacles might they face?

This qualitative study seeks to shed light on this one CSJFG using a thematic analysis to connect the interns’ understandings and operationalization of CSJ. It is important to note that there is critique about the overabundance of small-scale, narrowly focused, qualitative studies that do not necessarily produce outcomes that can be generalized supporting the need for social justice teacher education (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Sleeter, 2012). This study does not overcome the critique of being a small-scale study, however evidence from this study suggests having critical dialogues regarding CSJ while in teacher education *could* impact teachers’ understandings and reflexivity while teaching and I argue this is a step in the right direction.

4.1 Participants

Participants (Note 2) in this study were recruited from a required Educational Psychology class (EP401) at a large Southeastern University that preservice teachers took before their internship placements during their 5th year in the program (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participant Demographics

<i>Participant Demographics</i>							
Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race*	Major Concentration	Intern School Placement	First Year Teaching Placement	Second Year Teaching Placement
Jack	Male	24	White	Secondary Social Studies	11th Grade History; Suburban	Left teaching	n/a
Tasha	Female	23	African American	Secondary English/Literature	5th Grade Elementary; Urban	4th Grade; Urban	4th Grade; Urban
Natalie	Female	26	White	Urban Multicultural Elementary	10th Grade English; Suburban	7th Grade; Urban	8th Grade; Urban
Rachel	Female	22	White	Urban Multicultural Elementary	5th Grade Elementary; Urban	2nd Grade; Urban	3rd Grade; Urban

*Self-identified.

As their former instructor, I recruited students in email explaining the purposes of my study at the end of the semester once grades were finalized. I was aware of the teacher education programs they were enrolled in, familiar with the curriculum required by NCATE (now CAEP) standards and understood that CSJ topics were often only infused at the teacher educators' discretion. The four interns' who agreed to be a part of the first CSJFG completed a teaching questionnaire sharing their educational backgrounds and interest in social justice.

Natalie Costigan

Natalie Costigan, a white female from Boston, shared her upbringing in a poor community raised by her single mother. In our meetings, she identified herself as an "at-risk" child in school, treated differently by her teachers and peers because she had a "weird name" that was different from her mother's and she moved a lot. Natalie graduated with a bachelor's degree in English Literature and a minor in Art History. She worked for a year in retail before deciding to return to graduate school to obtain her teaching credentials. While Natalie initially resisted the idea of teaching, one summer she worked with, The Graduation Project (TGP), a non-profit partnership with urban public schools working to prepare students with college/career support, social services, and community engagement. She believed working with TGP sparked a more critical view of teaching. It was through this experience Natalie became interested in participating in the CSJFG.

Jack Bradley

Jack Bradley, a white male from Nashville explained that he grew up in a middle-class home with his mother, father, and brother. He attended a diverse high school that was about 60% black, 30% white, and 10% Latinx. During our meetings he revealed that his mom paid a tuition fee to have him take a bus to another high school that was "better than the one he was zoned for". This school offered an

International Baccalaureate (IB) program, that attracted many “highly qualified” teachers who he stated fueled his desire to teach. During our meetings Jack referenced his exposure to cultural studies courses in teacher education and how this influenced his pedagogy. After taking several critical elective courses in teacher education, Jack wanted to continue the dialogue in the CSJFG.

Kayla Smith

Kayla Smith, an African American female from Memphis shared she was raised by her grandparents after her parents passed away, and lived with aunts, cousins, and a younger sister. She attended a predominantly Black urban high school that led her to join the Urban Multicultural Cohort that prepared teachers for urban settings. Kayla often shared her own experiences growing up as a “marginalized youth” in an urban school and how this contributed to her interest in participating in the CSJFG.

Rachel Willow

Rachel Willow, a white female from Chattanooga was a third generation teacher who shared her love of teaching stemmed from her family of educators. Her culturally and socioeconomically diverse elementary school shed light on difference to her at an early age. Rachel graduated from college with her bachelor’s in Art History and a minor in Elementary Education. She was also a part of the Urban-Multicultural Cohort seeking to teach elementary school in an urban setting. Rachel shared early on she was influenced by the works of Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1994) from an independent reading course and it was this exposure to critical pedagogy that led her to the CSJFG.

4.2 Data Sources

Facilitating a conversation on a particular topic among a selected group of people is often known as a *focus group* (Glesne, 2006, p. 103). I specifically labeled these focus groups “Critical Social Justice Focus Groups” (CSJFG) for the purpose of this study. Focus groups rely on the interactions that take place around particular topics, such as CSJ in this study. Over the course of six months, the interns read articles and were asked to write journal reflections from both the reading and any experiences they had in either their preservice field experiences or internship placements to share with our group. Given my goal was to illuminate the intern teachers’ understandings and experiences participating in this CSJFG, allowing the participants to have flexibility in the direction of the sessions was suiting.

Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996) recommend focus groups for studies that are “exploratory or explanatory in nature” (p. 34). I had no predetermined questions to ask during the focus groups, so I made inferences throughout the discussions by listening to the participants and attempted to make sense of their experiences. My role relied heavily on facilitation and moderation skills while balancing the group members’ interactions (Glesne, 2006).

As the study progressed, I transcribed the focus group transcripts and wrote analytic memos as I reflected (Saldaña, 2009). I thought of other questions that came to mind, and asked for clarification when needed. Member checking was utilized as I emailed the transcripts to the interns each month to ask for clarification or addendums to add to the transcripts (Glesne, 2006). Throughout the process of

questioning and offering commentary, I became a part of the participants' dialogue and at this point recursive reflexivity became a crucial part of the methodological process as I worked through my own discomforts in the data (Anders, 2012; Pillow, 2003).

4.3 Data Analysis

To illuminate the interns' voices regarding their understandings of CSJ, I focused on the data from the focus group transcripts. I employed a thematic analysis of the transcripts and observation/reflection notes to code and analyze the data collected (Glesne, 2006). This process began by reading through all the transcripts and reflections to determine initial codes. I decided to code in larger chunks so that I could capture the sense making of the participants and not lose meaning from their words. After reading through the data and creating initial and focused codes (Saldaña, 2009), I was able to sort and synthesize larger amounts of data by consolidating initial codes and fitting them into what might be considered "the big picture". The unifying themes are addressed in the following sections.

5. Findings and Discussion: Intern Teachers' Understandings and Experiences

As many scholars have noted, there is a need to examine and understand how teachers who have been exposed to issues of CSJ translate what they have learned while in their education into the classroom (Grant & Agosto, 2008; Sleeter & Owuor, 2011). This research sought to illuminate intern teachers' understandings and experiences while participating in a CSJFG, as well as conceptualize the ways in which they discuss they implement CSJ in classrooms.

In this study, I found that the intern teachers expressed clear and thoughtful understandings about teaching for CSJ, but equally expressed the difficulty of implementation due to larger systemic issues in schools and society. Throughout my analysis, the themes I produced unified the intern teachers' understandings. There were three overarching themes found across the six focus group sessions:

- *Critical awareness*- refers to the experiences the participants recognized, how they reflected throughout their teaching, fought deficit models, and held on to ideas of empowerment and agency for themselves and their students.
- *Advocacy: "It's about the Students"*- issues regarding the importance of knowing their students and meeting their needs; also included creating a "safe" environment for learning to occur and the challenges associated with such.
- *Praxis Defeat*- demonstrating the constant struggles the participants faced as they recognized systemic inequity. This theme also discussed the defeat the interns felt as they tried to promote CSJ but felt pressures from external forces and unrealistic portrayals of teachers.

The major themes I produced combined the major ideas that came across from *each* intern teacher and are discussed in greater detail in the following section. I did look to see if there was a progression in development of their ideas from the first focus group to the last, but there was not a clear linear progression, so this did not become a part of this analysis. Although each intern teacher had different experiences that were unique to him or her, they shared the commonality of participating in the CSJFG.

These findings are not meant to communicate a cause and effect relationship from participating in a CSJFG. In others words, I am not asserting that should someone else conduct a similar study they would yield the same results. These findings reflect these individual interns' understandings and experiences, which is an important part of positionality, and are influenced by their prior experiences and the contexts in which they teach.

5.1 Critical Awareness

It takes more than just being aware of something to practice social justice (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Grant & Agosto, 2008). There has to be a critical component within awareness when working toward social justice, meaning that teachers are “engaged in self-reflection about their own socialization into [social] groups (their ‘positionality’) and must strategically act from that awareness in ways that challenge social injustice” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. *xviii*). Each intern teacher engaged in a critical awareness in some fashion throughout this study. The interns held their own ideas of CSJ from previous classes they had taken (Jack), scholars they had read (Rachel), teaching placements held in diverse communities (Natalie, Kayla, and Rachel) and own racialization (Kayla). It was apparent that throughout the CSJFG the interns were aware of the inequalities in society and believed it was one of their responsibilities to work toward change. Using the examples of critical reflection and fighting deficit thinking, I will illustrate how the interns revealed their understandings.

Critical Reflection

An important part of embracing a critical awareness was acknowledging the importance of reflecting, both for the intern teachers and for their students. Howard (2003) explains, “the term *critical reflection* attempts to look at reflection within moral, political, and ethical contexts of teaching. Issues pertaining to equity, access, and social justice are typically ascribed to critical reflection” (p. 197, emphasis in original). When teaching for social justice, reflection becomes critical and calls for teachers to, “reflect on their own racial and cultural identities and to recognize how these identities coexist with the cultural compositions of their students” (Howard, 2003, p. 196). An example of critical reflection displayed how the interns' used their CSJ knowledge to inform their pedagogical decisions to increase awareness amongst their students. Here the teachers used this critical reflection as an attempt to promote CSJ in their classrooms as well as actively take a stance on issues they deemed as challenging. For example, in a conversation over derogatory language used in schools, Kayla believed that the responsibility to correct students was on the teacher:

It's important for us as educators, if we know something is right or wrong, and if we hear our kids using [language] the wrong way, [then] that's the key time to really hit it right there when it's said instead of waiting. You know how busy our days are. You might not be able to remember [if you wait to address the situation] and you know how important it is when those teachable moments come.

Natalie also shared her methods on how she handled the use of derogatory language in the classroom:

I tell my kids all the time that you don't even understand the power of what you have to say. This

power can lead you to great places [or] it can lead you to dark places over time. Think about what you say to people. Think about how you feel when people say things to you.

In a similar fashion, Jack discussed the importance of addressing these situations and how as a teacher having students reflect on language could potentially stop the cycle:

[You can start] by having a talk with your kids. Say, *look, when you say 'retarded' and when you say 'gay' you're reproducing this power that is very unhealthy to society at large ...* It's about power but it is also understanding language.

Each of the interns were encouraging critical reflection among their students in different ways. Cammarota and Romero (2009) assert a key objective for social justice educators should be modeling critical consciousness in their instruction. "Ultimately, modeling critical consciousness facilitates students' awareness of the social and economic forces bearing down on their lives, and the potential for disrupting those forces" (Cammarota & Romero, 2009, p. 469). In the examples above, the interns shared their stories of how they promoted critical reflection amongst their students in differing ways that worked in their classroom contexts. These types of conversations in K-12 schools are a starting point for teachers practicing CSJ to teach students about how inequalities are reproduced.

In addition to promoting critical reflection amongst the students, throughout the CSJFG the interns discussed how important it was for them to address their own assumptions and biases. It first takes awareness to identify bias, and then a process of critical reflection must ensue to work against this. Jack worked at a school that was typically deemed without its problems. However, his highly affluent, mostly White, upper-middle class high school, Western High, accepted several transfer students from McGarther High—a school across town that served a majority of lower socioeconomic African American and Latina/o students. Jack's understandings of CSJ in this case were sparked when reading about deficit models in education (Note 3). Jack acknowledged that two of his three transfer students (who were of color) were failing his class, but only the failing kids were talked about, and never the one succeeding. He was aware of how systemic inequality functioned from the readings we had done and tried not to let that impact how he saw these students or the expectations he held. Because of the articles we read in the CSJFG and Jack's own experiences dealing with teachers at his school stereotyping students of color, Jack realized how important it was to reflect and confront these biases:

In the article, [the authors] say that there are all these subtle and covert forms of racism and I think that contributes not only to permanence but also the dynamic aspect of it. It cites a need to identify these subtleties, and so we don't always know what subtle messages we're sending that are racist messages, that's stereotypical and all these deficit models. We're not even aware of them. You have to first identify those, [and because people don't] that's why the permanence of racism [still exists].

Acknowledging the permanence of racism and how this might impact teachers' perception of students of color is not a simple task and often involves a feeling of discomfort (Wheatley, 2002). Howard (2003) reminds us, "teachers must be prepared to engage in a rigorous and oftentimes painful reflection

process about what it means to teach students who come from different racial and cultural backgrounds than their own” (p. 198).

In our focus groups, Jack began acknowledging the students who were zoned for Western High as “suburbanites” opposed to those students who were seen as the “transfers”. The topic of transfer students sparked many conversations throughout the CSJFG regarding race and access. The interns were aware of the perceptions that different schools had given their locations and knew it was a part of their responsibility to help inform ALL students about CSJ issues, whether they were a part of the “suburban” or “urban” community. Overall, the focus group decided that promoting awareness in your students and being reflective as a teacher was a very important part of promoting CSJ in the classroom. Throughout our focus groups, the interns exhibited their own versions of critical reflection. Natalie explained:

First it’s recognizing the subtleties. I mean you have to be able to think about the things you don’t think about, you know, that metacognitive thing. How am I approaching this and from what lens am I using? You don’t [always] think about [this] because it’s your own lens. [You might think] how could I look at it through Critical Race Theory and incorporate that perspective?

This quote sums up this sub-theme well. A part of practicing CSJ involves understanding one’s own positionality, where a person is coming from, and what biases he or she might carry. You must start here, and then one can move forward to the “action” part within the definition of CSJ.

Fighting Deficits

The other sub-theme within critical awareness included fighting deficits particularly when talking about “transfers” within school districts. The critical awareness espoused by the interns led to them “checking” themselves when it came to issues of deficit thinking. Rachel noted teachers’ attitudes about students coming from certain ethnic backgrounds or low-income families might also influence their judgment as well as students’ perceptions of this judgment. The interns agreed students are aware of teacher’s expectations and perceptions of them. Rachel and Natalie dialogued:

S: Especially if a student is coming from a background where maybe schools aren’t valued or they don’t think that somebody, especially a White teacher, cares about them anyway and then [the teacher starts] drilling them and punishing them.

[Natalie interrupts]

N: And when kids are forced to leave a school and go to another one, that could be speaking back to [students’ attitudes]. Adults do [this too]. If you’re forced to leave your job and go to another location, you [might] have an attitude. I wouldn’t have chosen to go here, and over time that [might] change but it’s hard to do that to people.

During this conversation the interns were working through the difficulties of why transfer students might have a harder time in a newly assigned school environment. Natalie even went so far as to say, “it’s setting them up for failure”. However, inherent within this explanation, the idea that “schools aren’t valued” reflects a deficit perspective.

Kayla complicated this situation even further given her own experience going to a high school with “transfer” students that she explained made “stereotypes seem true” (referring to Black students from particular neighborhoods). Kayla acknowledged that as the teacher, despite her own experience, the responsibility to look at students as individuals and not immediately make assumptions was essential:

[This] comes with not stereotyping people based on their race or based on what you heard about them. It takes really getting to know our students and just because they come from, an underprivileged home or something like that, it doesn't mean that they are not smart. If you take the opportunity to really get to know your students and really learn how they learn, then you'll be able to judge [the student] based on what you know, [and] not based on the stereotypes transformed around certain persons and their race.

Over the course of our CSJFG, instead of accepting that students are unmotivated, or do not want to learn, the interns ultimately reflected on their understandings that many things were outside of students' control and as the teachers they needed to fight their own deficit thinking if they were to practice CSJ. The theme “critical awareness” shed an overall understanding of the importance of using the literature to aid intern (practicing) teachers in their reactions to the issues they may face in school. Adopting this critical lens aids in moving away from a deficit way of thinking so teachers can re-evaluate their role in capitalizing on students' strengths.

5.2 Advocacy: “It's about the Students”

An important part of teaching for social justice is recognizing the needs of students and being an advocate for them. I called this theme Advocacy: “It's about the students”, using the interns' own language, because when the interns spoke about students they often took a student-centered approach. Within social justice literature, student advocacy is centered on the idea of teachers working on behalf of (and with) their students to promote equity (Ladson-Billings, 1994; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Sleeter, 2009). Teachers practicing social justice are aware of the ways schools reproduce inequalities and use this awareness to, “embrace their roles as student advocates and active community members” (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009, p. 595). I will highlight two different scenarios discussed on multiple occasions: 1) allies in the LGBTQ community, and 2) advocacy for racial awareness.

Allies in the LGBTQ Community

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) define ally as, “a member of the dominant group who *acts* to end oppression in all aspects of social life by consistently seeking to advocate for the group who is oppressed in relation to them” (p. 158). During several focus group meetings, the interns, aware of their own “heteronormativity”, discussed the importance of making LGBTQ students feel safe in the classroom (Note 4). Natalie learned one of her students was a victim of cyberbullying outside of school because he had two lesbian moms. Though she felt she had no control over what occurred off of the school campus, she believed it was important to make the other educators and leaders in the school aware of the situation:

I went to the principal about it and everything and spoke to her because I think it's really

important that students feel safe at school. You hear about kids all the time who take their own lives or they hurt themselves or they feel emotionally distraught.

When Natalie's principal replied that her "hands were tied", Natalie, suggested that the school hold an assembly to discuss what was happening. The principal agreed to hold an assembly, but only if they were to frame the issue of harassing LGBTQ students as a cyberbullying problem. The principal's reaction to the situation is not surprising considering the widespread belief that talking about LGBTQ issues in schools is inappropriate to discuss (Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Meyer, 2008), and a prevalence of anti-LBGTQ climates in public schools (Griffin & Ouelett, 2003; Poteat & Espelage, 2007). These beliefs are especially prevalent where Natalie taught in the South, as it was well known State Representative Stacey Campbell, repeatedly tried to pass the "Don't Say Gay" bill, later called the "Classroom Protection Act" in efforts to silence LGBTQ voices in schools and make it illegal for teachers to acknowledge these students' identities. While Natalie thought a discussion with students and faculty about cyberbullying was better than no action at all, she recognized that the LGBTQ students' voices were being silenced and speaking out against this would be going against the majority. Natalie realized the risk she would be taking if she were to stand up against the "majority" in the school, but believed it was the ethical thing to do on behalf of her students:

Depending on the population of the school set-up, it's going against the cultural norm to say something that you're in support of gay and lesbian rights, because if everyone else is saying, *well this a school that condones good Christian behavior and we are going to love the sinner but hate the sin*, to speak out against that would put you in the minority depending on the school and the situation. I feel because I know in the Bible belt here, people don't outwardly say I am a homophobe, but they talk about *well it's not right*. You know, it's under the guise of it's ok, I am not going to judge you *but I am going to judge you*.

Natalie became a member of the Gay-Straight Alliance at High Falls to show her support of the one student suffering from bullying and to serve as a visible ally for LGBTQ students and families. For her, this was the first step to be a support for her student and let him know she was someone whose trust she would work to earn.

Jack also felt he saw homophobia permeating school environments, but believed there were still small things that teachers could do to be an ally for their students:

[T]hey have the little bracelets and they have the shirts and stuff and the idea is you just wear that. If educators could do something so small as to wear a bracelet, that kind of opens you up as a teacher to all your LGBTQ students, and it says *I'm an ally*, right? ... *I'm an ally for the cause!* I think that's great because [research] talks about how teachers don't want to do anything or want to maintain the status quo, but [wearing a bracelet is] something simple that a teacher could do.

Both of these examples demonstrate how Jack and Natalie were wrestling with a dominant ideology [cultural, social, and political norms] and what small acts of resistance they can do to be advocates for

their students. While both Natalie and Jack acknowledged the ways they could be advocates for their LGBTQ students, Natalie also shared that it goes beyond just wearing a bracelet, it means thinking about how this influences instruction:

I think it's interesting to think, *do some teachers look at it as all I have to do is wear this bracelet?*

Because if that's the case that's not effective. Because if you're wearing a bracelet, but you don't talk about the issues in class [then that's not effective].

Natalie shared as an English teacher often teaching about “dead White guys” that maintained the status quo, she found other opportunities to think about how to positively frame the LGBTQ community in her classroom by thinking about how being a gay author might have impacted writing. For example, Natalie talked about how when teaching Shakespeare, she waited for her mentor teacher to leave so she could talk with students about how he was allegedly gay. She would tell students, “*Ok let's get to the good stuff!* I'll be open with them and tell them we'll talk about him [being gay]”. She shared, “At first they're intrigued, but [students] don't want to show it because socially they are not supposed to be interested in [homosexuality]”. However, after several discussions, she found students were more open to the idea of homosexuality and it was less stigmatized in her classroom. Cochran-Smith (2004) might describe Natalie's actions as “teaching against the grain”:

Unlike researchers who remain outside the schools, teachers who are committed to working against the grain inside their schools are not at liberty to publicly announce brilliant but excoriating critiques of their colleagues and the bureaucracies in which they work. Their ultimate commitment is to the school lives and the futures of the children with whom they live and work (p. 28).

Natalie believed in addition to showing that one supports LGBTQ students, teachers must also find ways to positively promote diversity, such as sexual orientation, in their classrooms through instruction.

Advocacy for Racial/Class Awareness

Other examples of student advocacy were present in the CSJFG regarding race and class. Jack shared his story regarding his efforts to teach the Civil Rights Movement using the PBS documentary series *Their Eyes on the Prize* that discussed the Emmitt Till murder. He posed one of the problems to the group regarding one of his “transfer” student's reactions to the documentary:

One of my McGarther students, *one of my Black students*, he keeps making jokes. We're looking at slides from the March on Birmingham and the dogs are being brought out on these people and he's making a joke about how the dog's ripping the guy's pants off and I'm thinking why is he joking about this?

Everyone in the meeting unanimously agreed that the one student making jokes could have been uncomfortable discussing race issues, particularly as one of the only Black students in the class. As explained earlier, the term “transfer” was codified to mean the Black kids at Western High and was attached with a negative connotation. Kayla, an African American woman herself, felt that addressing this situation was important topic that should not be overlooked:

You need to stress the importance and the seriousness of this subject, because you were saying [look] how far have we come... In some places... [like in this group] we can talk openly, and we can get along with each other, but in [other] places racism is still strong, so the key is that the students, especially your Black students, need to understand it. Just because it's ok here [doesn't meant it's] going to be like that everywhere you go.

Kayla believed whether the topic was comfortable or not, it still needed to be discussed. She acknowledged racism was still present and with this understanding it was her job as the teacher to make sure students of color were aware of racism as well. This wasn't just her job as a Black teacher, but all teachers' jobs to discuss racism. Some scholars believe that teachers who are advocates for their students will have discussions around uncomfortable topics to promote awareness and social justice in their classrooms- this is another component of advocacy work (Howard, 2003; Daniels, 2011). While I agree that, "we must critically engage with difficult truths that have existed regarding injustice" (Daniels, 2011, p. 211), I believe teachers also need to be deeply aware of their own positionalities, the positionalities of the students they are teaching, and how what is taught is interconnected with these positionalities. Seemingly, having these "uncomfortable" conversations is one way for teachers to work against the status quo and bring representation to marginalized voices in schools, however I wish to problematize this idea. Leonardo and Porter (2010) contend that there is never a safe space for students of color to engage in conversations about race with whites. They explain:

If we are truly interested in racial pedagogy, then we must become comfortable with the idea that for marginalized and oppressed minorities, there is no safe space. As implied above, mainstream race dialogue in education is arguably already hostile and unsafe for many students of color whose perspectives and experiences are consistently minimized. *Violence is already there* (p. 149, emphasis in original).

Given the fact that Jack's student was a "transfer" student surrounded by "suburbanites", he may not have seen the dialogue of race from a White teacher surrounded by White students as beneficial (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Jack was concerned that racism was a problem within his classroom and there was a clear divide between the "suburbanites" and the "transfer" kids. One "suburbanite" student told Jack, *I don't like sitting next to this kid. I don't like how disrespectful he is, come to think of it; I don't like any of those transfer kids.* Jack asserted to his class that, "we're not going to make generalizations". He struggled with finding ways to integrate his classroom so that they could have meaningful conversations regarding race and class but knew this was an important component of teaching for CSJ. It is not uncommon for White teachers to feel this confusion and discomfort when directly dealing with issues of race in the classroom (Paley, 2009). As a member of the dominant majority (White middle-class male), Jack might have felt insecure about his role in addressing race topics in the classroom; however, importantly he did not embrace a "colorevasive" approach and went about teaching the Civil Rights Movement bringing up issues of racism, discrimination, and prejudice. Howard (2006) shares, "As White educators, we cannot fully know or experience the struggles of our

students and colleagues of color, but we can work to create an empathic environment in which their stories and experiences can be acknowledged and shared” (p. 79). Through their conversations, Jack and Kayla clearly believed they were acting in solidarity with their students by being an advocate for them, however it was important for them to acknowledge some students may never feel “safe” having racial conversations. This was one of the difficult realizations we came to terms with in the CSJFG but was also crucial in advancing the conversation regarding the racialized role that teachers and students embody in the classroom. This finding suggests that the “messiness” of teaching for CSJ is an important component to doing this work. We cannot suggest “how-to guides” to promote CSJ, rather we must acknowledge that dialogue around difficult issues is essential to providing varying perspective for teachers to be advocates for marginalized students.

5.3 Praxis Defeat

After many different variations of this theme, the third theme *praxis defeat* emerged from the data and it is the theme I will complicate the most about given the current educational climate of standards and accountability. This theme highlights the pushback the interns held regarding their understandings of social justice, as well as the unspoken statements that revealed their resistance. Despite being aware of the bigger issues influencing schools, and expressing ideas of hope, empowerment, and resistance, the interns often discussed elements of defeat that seemed to counteract these other ideas. In order to understand how I created this theme, we must unpack definitions of power and praxis.

Any discussion related to CSJ will bring up some discussion of power. In the context of social justice, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) define power as, “the ideological, technical, and discursive elements by which those in authority impose their ideas and interest on everyone” (p. 52). Foucault (1995)’s work helps to explain the ways in which power operates in institutions such as schools. In his work, he analyzed the 19th century prison structure called “the panopticon” to illustrate how those in charge (the prison guards) were able to watch the prisoners without their knowledge. The situation created a form of “self-policing” amongst the prisoners because there were never aware of when they were being watched and in turn began to monitor themselves. Foucault used this metaphor to examine the ways in which power is “transmitted, normalized, and internalized through social institutions such as prisons, military, hospitals, and schools” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 53). Society is socialized to be in compliance with norms that serve dominant interests. Power was apparent throughout every conversation we had, whether it was explicitly stated or not, as the interns discussed things they “could” or “could not” do.

Additionally, praxis refers to a connection of theory to practice (Freire, 1970), so when teachers feel they cannot apply what they have learned in theory to practice, they often feel a sort of defeat. Similarly, Villegas and Lucas (2002) refer to such concepts as “despair”, that prevents the hope needed to be a change agent. The interns held onto ideas of hope, which Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) argue is “the ultimate virtue on which a decent and successful school system depends” (p. 57). However, Villegas and Lucas (2002) explain:

Hopefulness is difficult to sustain. The postmodern critique of power relations and the recognition of the pervasiveness of structures of domination and hegemony have had an important impact by bringing covert oppression and antidemocratic practices into the light of day (p. 58).

At the same time, “the force of this critique can create a sense of despair, a sense that all actions are oppressive and that human agency is an illusion” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 58). This frame of thought can help to explain some of the obstacles the interns developed as they attempted to practice CSJ in their classrooms. Coming back to Foucault’s (2005) example of “self-policing”, the interns never discussed a worry about getting in trouble or getting fired for practicing CSJ in their classrooms, however, they focused on other more technical aspects of teaching that related to how power operated in schools and was normalized. I will unpack these ideas further in two different scenarios that came up in our conversations related to, 1) being a “superhero” teacher, and 2) structural forces and negativity.

“Superhero” Teacher

The interns agreed that in their schools they watched veteran teachers become overworked and complacent in their jobs making it easy to overlook teaching for CSJ. They identified the false portrayals in the media and how this impacted the way they thought about teaching. Natalie brought up the example from the movie *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) stating, it was “amazing that she [Erin Gruwell] could do that and there are people that do make a difference. But it is a lot like, she lost her life essentially”. Natalie concluded those who were able to make a difference in the classroom often had to sacrifice time and essentially teaching became their lives:

N: It’s frustrating. If you want to be someone that goes to try to make a difference, then you’re either naïve or you’re trying to be like a *White savior* in a Black school. You’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t. It’s tough. There is no way to synthesize [how] you want to go to a failing school and help as a White teacher...

Me: Right, because you’re the superhero teacher...

N: [Right], then you’re trying to be a superhero or it’s going to be like why are you even bothering? It’s really uncomfortable – uncomfortable in terms of how to approach making that situation different, you know?

Here not only is Natalie acknowledging the pressures that she feels being a teacher trying to do everything, she is also acknowledging her whiteness and how she feels this adds yet another obstacle for her if she were to work in a diverse school. This example also highlights the myth of the teacher as a hero/heroine saving the day. Movies like *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995) and *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) suggest that students of color are in need of “saving”, and so remove them of any real sense of agency or ability for social mobility for these students. Many White teachers, myself included, have been swayed by this sort of romanticized portrayal of the *superhero teacher* or the *white savior*, which effectively “renders the misrepresentation of the potential of people of color to resist and lead the transformation of oppressive conditions within their own social context” (Cammarota, 2011, p.

245). Brown (2013) highlights that, “It is important to note that this [idea] is reproduced in teachers’ minds, not only through mass media, but also in teacher training and professional development programs, as well as through national policy debates in education” (p. 129). By comparing herself to Erin Gruwell, Natalie problematized the concept of *white savior*, but still clung on to the idea that Gruwell “made a difference” which ultimately made her feel frustrated and that she could never accomplish what Gruwell did as portrayed in the film. As teacher educators, we can learn from these moments and be more explicit about media representation and the damaging affects it can have on potential teachers. I also believe that Natalie’s suggestion of Erin Gruwell as a model highlights the need for more critical stances related to positionality and whiteness as a part of teacher education that disrupts the very notion of “saviority” that becomes so normalized around discussions of White teachers in racially diverse schools (Matias, 2015, p. 3). Without this disruption, as teacher educators we are actively stakeholders in maintaining the status quo that allow teachers to foster these “savior complex” mentalities, which go against the work that CSJ minded educators intend to do.

Structural Forces and Negativity

When talking about integrating her own beliefs about teaching with what she was able to do in practice, Rachel identified her struggles when she said, “that’s much easier said than done, and then it becomes much more controversial, and then there are obviously road blocks everywhere that I look [and] wrestle with in my own work”. While Rachel did not unpack this idea of what “controversial” means in this statement, this could be her own form of “self-policing” in which she recognized that conversations related to CSJ could be shut down if more conservative parents or students pushed back against topics such as if racism and homophobia were taught in schools.

The interns vocalized that while incorporating CSJ as a part of their pedagogy was important, at times it seemed nearly impossible due to forces outside of their control. Jack expressed his frustrations regarding teaching for social justice in schools:

[I]t’s you’re either getting social justice everywhere or you’re getting it nowhere. And that’s the way it has to be, and that’s the challenge of it right there. That’s why, you say, *can we ever get it?*

I don’t know. You know, it’s [going to] take a lot more than the 4 of us at this table.

This quote illustrates the contradictions Jack felt teaching for CSJ. Jack discussed how he believed it was pertinent for all the teachers in a school to be practicing social justice if it was going to mean something, which he had learned in his own experience was often unlikely. Rachel agreed stating, “you have to deal with the effects if [the students] come into your classroom after being in a [class that does not promote social justice]”. These quotes imply that despite the interns knowing they had some agency within their own practice, they succumbed to the belief there needed to be greater effort among the general population and school system to work to implement CSJ fully. Villegas and Lucas (2002) ask, “Without hope that their actions will make a difference, how can prospective teachers be expected to find the will to engage in action in increase social justice?” (p. 58). This is a question I posed to the interns when I continuously reminded them to hold on to their hope. Rachel acknowledged needing to

focus on the positive examples she had with students, but at times this was a “daunting task” and left her feeling lost.

Talking about how to implement CSJ was a continuous struggle for the interns. While they tried to hold on to their hope and remain optimistic, at times they seemed to excuse why veteran teachers fell into complacency. Teachers who have been in the system for a long time have to go into a “survival” mode. Natalie explained, “It’s easy to become complacent, like in this profession. I can see it”. The interns discussed how it was easier for teachers to adapt to a deficit model of thinking because they have been in the system for too long and do not feel they can change things. Rachel felt, “There are so many extra pressures they’re dealing with from every angle” and it is hard not to begin to think like that when this is all you are exposed to:

N: [The negative attitudes are] infectious. [In the] first week I [could] see all these things that [veteran teachers] told me I would see, but I didn’t think I would. And then you see people that were interns last year, [or] two years before, and they’re doing the same thing [having negative attitudes].

Me: [Novice teachers are] already down that path?

S: And it’s hard like [to blame them] because as a teacher they are having such a hard [time]. They have so many pressures [on them] so when a parent comes in [for example], it’s easy to make a joke and or say [the parents are] crazy. You know, [to just] do something [to] desensitize yourself [questioning inflection] so that you can get through the day.

The interns also expressed their frustrations regarding the image they believed society had of teachers. Natalie shared a story she read about how teachers were paid too much because they did not work a full forty-hour workweek. Jack shared he had heard talk about how easy it was to become a teacher and that teachers typically graduated from the bottom third of the class. Kayla agreed that these were negative portrayals of teachers and felt it unfair given the amount of responsibilities teachers held:

[You not only have to be] their teacher, you have to be their parents [and] you have to be the nurse. You have so many roles, and you don’t get paid for being just one person with all these different hats.

They also expressed their belief that in addition to knowing how to teach they were expected to fully know their content. Jack expressed one of the hardest things he has had to learn to do is “figuring out how to teach it:”

[When we’re told] *write a lesson plan*, you’re creating. You’re talking about all these different ability levels. You don’t just sit down and write that out off the top of your head. At least [for] me, I have to go sit down and think about it a little. And it’s not, *let me mull this over*; it’s like, *I have no idea what I’m going to do...*

Natalie reinforced this frustration when she shared other people she had spoken with told her how the answers were all in the teaching manuals.

As a teacher educator, this last theme demonstrates a less than desirable outcome for someone who full

heartedly believes in the potential to teach for CSJ and that this is necessary within teacher education. While analyzing the transcripts, I found that for all the many positive and inspiring examples the interns gave for how they implemented CSJ in their classrooms, there were these moments where they succumbed to the system wide pressures and felt this praxis defeat. Within this theme they noted how larger systemic inequalities created inequitable situations for some students and limited the access they had to some educational opportunities. They also identified the amount of pressures that were put on teachers and how negative images impacted their views on teaching.

6. Implications for Teacher Education

Adhering to the postcritical ethnographic framework that guided this study, as the researcher my critique of teacher education is embedded within the recognition of how power operates and maintains the status quo in schools of education through the marginalization of CSJ in coursework. In agreement with Sleeter (2014), I believe it is the role of teacher educators to conduct research and suggest improvements from *within* teacher education to better prepare teachers to transition into the classrooms and aid in narrowing educational disparities. Returning to my original questions, I was interested in illustrating the understandings and experiences this group of interns held while a part of the CSJFG and teaching in the classroom. How did they conceptualize CSJ? How did this impact their pedagogical decisions? Where did challenges exist? While the aims and scope of this study were not to evaluate a teacher education program or to claim a direct correlation between participating in a CSJFG and the development of teacher pedagogy, I argue that the intern teachers' exposure to literature regarding CSJ *did influence* or at least supported their understandings' and experiences as other research has supported (Picower, 2007/2011).

The interns' responses to our CSJFG may not have elicited the same results had their prior experiences not influenced them. Garmon's (2004/2005) research contends that preservice teachers' prior life experiences can greatly influence how they respond to CSJ courses. He found changes/support in CSJ beliefs are comprised of three main types of experiences: *intercultural*, *educational*, and *support-based*. Intercultural experiences refer to interactions with groups different from one's own. Educational experiences refer to information and experiences supported by teacher educators during preservice teachers' training. Support-based experiences refer to the mentorship and support systems developed during teacher education. All of the participants in this study had prior intercultural or educational experiences and gained support-based experiences during this study.

For Jack, his experiences were influenced through his ethnically and racially diverse high school where he was numerically a minority (intercultural), and the coursework in cultural studies that introduced him to new concepts (educational). For Rachel, it was through her experience in an ethnically and racially diverse primary school (intercultural), her experiences in her high school that promoted critical dialogue (educational), as well as her teacher education program that promoted critical pedagogy where she was influenced (educational). In addition to this, she also gained experience from the one-on-one

mentorship relationship that she developed with me (support-based) once she entered the classroom (Aronson, 2016). For Natalie, her experience growing up in poverty and being labeled as an “at-risk” child as well as her work with The Graduation Project (TGP) made her cognizant of societal inequalities (intercultural). Kayla grew up in a traditionally segregated city that still deals with integration issues to this day, as well as had the experience of attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) where she was in the numerical minority of African American teacher candidates (intercultural). Additionally, all of the intern teachers were exposed to support-based experiences while participating in the CSJFG with each other as well as from me. Understanding these connections are important for teacher education programs to consider the dispositions that teacher candidates’ embody upon entering their programs. We may not necessary always be able to control the types of intercultural experiences candidates hold prior to entering a program, but we must assess for a candidate’s willingness to have conversations regarding CSJ upon entrance to a program. Of course, within teacher education we can continue to foster the development and growth of a CSJ orientation further, however, I argue teacher education programs must take seriously their commitment to attract social justice candidates in the first place (Villegas, 2007).

Evidence from this study also supports the calls for teacher educators to “practice what they preach” (Conklin, 2008; Laughter, 2011; Ullucci, 2012). Not only do teacher educators need to be explicit about these conversations, they also need to model them for their students. For example, when discussing derogatory language with interns during one CSJFG meeting, I shared an example of how when I was teaching elementary school I reinforced a negative assumption of homosexuality when I scolded a boy student for calling a girl student a “lesbian”. I reflected upon how I should have addressed the derogatory use of the word instead of the fact that the boy was calling the girl a “bad name”. This example supported the interns’ conversation about the power of language and how it is a teacher’s job to challenge students on their word choices. I believe that my own vulnerability here was important in illustrating critical reflection and how we as teachers should never stop challenging ourselves.

Teacher education faculty must also promote awareness amongst other teacher educators and provide training for ways to effectively integrate social justice topics in other mandatory coursework (Conklin, 2015). Teacher educators’ also need to work to facilitate controversial conversations around topics such as race, racism, and whiteness (Matias, 2015). Cochran-Smith (2004) advocates for the, “intellectual and organizational contexts that support the ongoing learning of teacher educators” (p. 13). In my own experience, the first time I promoted critical dialogue in the higher education classroom, I felt ineffective and powerless. When future teachers made stereotypical comments that reinforced deficit-based ideologies, I did not know how to redirect the conversation. Over time, as I talked with colleagues and turned to the literature for answers, I became better at redirecting conversations and pointing out contradictions to my students without being accusatory, attempting to maintain a *safe* yet *contested* environment. My teaching evaluations eventually reflected my students’ gradual comfort in the classroom regarding controversial conversations. This example further illustrates that as teacher

educators, we too need training and professional development to support our future teachers in becoming social justice practitioners.

I align myself with Conklin's (2008) notion of critical, justice-oriented teacher education. She argues the role of care and empathy is often present in K-12 teaching but ignored in teacher education. If teacher educators are serious about espousing beliefs for social justice, then they must embrace these ideals themselves and model compassion and care to the students whom they teach. One example she gives involves having a complex understanding of prospective teachers' backgrounds. She explains, "rather than blame prospective teachers for the nature of the experiences they have or have not had, teacher educators can honor the experiences prospective teachers bring to the classroom and try to use these experiences as a starting point for helping them learn about and enact justice-oriented teaching" (p. 666). I might model my own progression of understanding whiteness to begin to develop relationships with students and ease them into having conversations about what they may have conceived as *uncomfortable* topics such as race and religion.

In addition to critiquing teacher education and teacher educators, I must also be willing to critique myself throughout the research process to share more about the affordances and constraints of implementing a CSJFG. My experiences as a teacher educator and researcher throughout this study have informed my analysis and the suggestions that I have for teacher educators in connection to the literature. I have learned in the few years I have done this work that teacher educators must *creatively* find spaces for dialogue and reflection in their coursework, because not all teacher education programs will readily include CSJ within their program requirements. I also must acknowledge and *complicate* the privilege that I hold as a white teacher educator working with predominately white teachers. This is something I seek to explore further in future research.

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, I have learned as a teacher educator is that we must be explicit when discussing CSJ issues such as racism or sexuality in our coursework (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Mayo, 2014). Not only do teacher educators need to be explicit about these conversations, they also need to model them for their students (Conklin, 2008; Ullucci, 2012). The CSJFG is just one example of a support system I set up to support intern teachers' understandings of CSJ as they transitioned into classrooms. I also believe that through continued support, new teachers can work through the obstacles they will inevitably face so they are equipped with the knowledge and ability to rationalize their CSJ practices. We cannot allow *praxis defeat* to be an excuse for why we do not include CSJ within teacher education or K-12 spaces. As teacher educators and classroom teachers, we need to continue to share our methods of promoting CSJ in our classroom spaces and use these narratives for us to learn from and challenge one another.

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Notes

Note 1. When I refer to teacher education or teacher preparation, I do not mean to suggest a programmatic view of teacher education or to assess the teacher preparation program the participants are enrolled in. I use the terms “teacher preparation” or “teacher education” to refer to my specific participants’ experiences throughout their own preparation.

Note 2. All names and programs have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Note 3. The article Jack was referring to was “Critical Race Theory, Multicultural Education, and the Hidden Curriculum of Hegemony” by Michelle Jay.

Note 4. Jack and Natalie had the primary examples of working with LGBTQ students and families. This could be that because they taught in high school environments, awareness of sexual diversity was more prevalent. Rachel and Kayla claimed they were unaware of any LGBTQ students or families that might be a part of their classrooms nevertheless, they both expressed the importance for being advocates for LGBTQ students in our meetings.