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First Comes a Look at the Self:

INTEGRATING THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE INTO A TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

By Gloshanda Lawyer, Cheryl Shahan, Leala Holcomb, and David H. Smith

For us, social justice in education means that educators can be agents for bringing equity into the everyday lives of people at every level of society. In order for equity to be obtained, teachers and other school personnel must be able to recognize inequities in all forms, including but not limited to gender, race, class, ability, and language. Additionally, teachers and school personnel must be prepared to act against forms of inequity within the classroom in order to promote social change among students and in society as a whole. Striving for a world in which opportunity is equally available to every student has become the goal of classrooms throughout the United States.

The deaf education program at the University of Tennessee, housed in the Theory and Practice in Teacher Education Department, includes an educational interpreting major as well as a deaf education teacher preparation major. In the fall of 2014, we decided to embed the principles of social justice within the content of the deaf education program as well as apply these principles in real-world application specifically within the teacher preparation major. The four authors and Kimberly Wolbers, program director of the Deaf Education Teacher Preparation Program, began working systematically to instill the concept and practice of social justice within our classes. This meant: 1) evaluating our own awareness levels; 2) working collaboratively with faculty and doctoral students; 3) addressing the curriculum, implementing strategies that included selected assignments, materials, resources, and presentations; and 4) addressing faculty and students' readiness and resistance to this process. It meant not just attempting to change the awareness and habits of our students but looking at and perhaps changing ourselves as role models.

Photos and illustration courtesy of Gloshanda Lawyer, Cheryl Shahan, Leala Holcomb, and David H. Smith



Social Justice in the Classroom Evaluating Awareness

Previous research found that many teachers expressed preference for teaching students like themselves (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). Therefore, raising teacher candidates' awareness that their preferences and the differences in their identities form their students' identities was an important part of our process. In deaf education settings, this means that most teachers are white while 50 percent of their students are students of color. Most teachers are female while their students range the gender spectrum. Most teachers are English monolinguals having learned American Sign Language (ASL) in school, and most students come from families that do not use English or ASL in their homes. Most teachers are abled while 40 percent of their students have disabilities, and most teachers come from cultures in which the individual is prized over the family or the community while most students come from cultures in which the family or the community is prized over the individual. (See Table 1.)

It is important to recognize that most teachers are different from the majority of their students. Due to the lack of similarities between

teachers and students, it is critical that university preparation programs create opportunities for future or current teachers to recognize that differences in identities matter and to enable young teachers to engage in ongoing self-reflection. Naming the characteristics of those who determine the content and style of the classroom environment is a good starting place in the process of bringing social justice into the classroom and in fostering introspection.

Beyond the Hierarchies Working Collaboratively

Within higher education, power hierarchies exist between faculty and students, even at the doctoral level. One of the ways we applied principles of social justice was through working beyond these typical power hierarchies and establishing a collaborative model. Two doctoral students, both among the authors of this article, served as social justice liaisons, working in concert with the deaf education program faculty. This collaboration included standing meetings, check-ins, discussion sessions, readings, and exchange of materials related to various topics of justice. Some of the topics included: language, gender, race, class,

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Table 1: Characteristics of Teachers and Students in Deaf Education Settings

Most Teachers	Most Students
White	Multiethnic (50 percent students of color)
Native-born	Immigrants (1 in 5 children enrolled in school)
Christian	Not Christian
Monolingual (learned ASL in college)	Home language not English (25 percent from Spanish-language homes)
Middle class	Varying class
Women	Gender spectrum
Heterosexual	Sexual orientation/relationship spectrum
Abled	Dis/abled (40 percent receive services for disabilities)
Individualist	Collectivist

(Gallaudet Research Institute, 2013; Goodwin, 2002; Sleeter, 2008)

and disability.

The liaisons were responsible for providing the materials, leading discussions, and assisting faculty in the areas that the faculty had decided were areas of needed growth or change within the program. In anticipation of tough talk, or “courageous conversations” in the words of researchers Singh and Salazar (2010), we realized the importance of trust and open-mindedness in introducing this issue, particularly when we used information based on the experiences of individuals with diverse backgrounds.

We rely on each other for information and resources that best fit certain assignments in the course, and reach out to each other and other colleagues for support. We constantly provide check-ins, acknowledge the possibility of us causing harm without realizing it, and explicitly invite colleagues and students to hold us accountable when our words, whether signed or spoken, or actions cause harm.

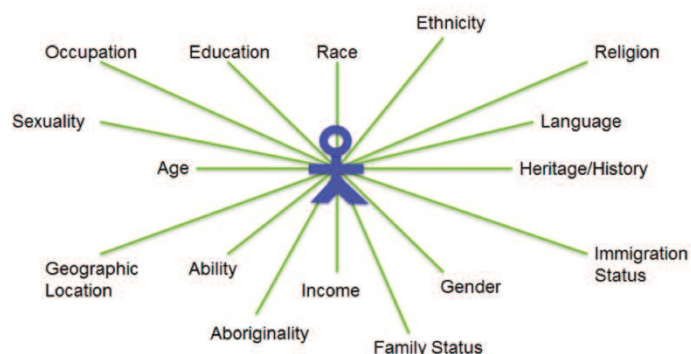
Practical Strategies Addressing Curriculum

We have used various strategies to incorporate the concepts of social justice into our courses. These include:

- **PowerPoint presentations**—We include representation from different communities in the PowerPoint presentations and highlight different perspectives of various groups through pictures or texts. We even have a slide for a “Social Justice Pause,” allowing students to take time to reflect on any given topic through the social justice lens.
- **Assignments**—We ask students to focus on gender, race, and disability in their field logs or class observations. We also ask that their notes focus on the following:
 - *Communication and identity*—This means observing turn-taking between the teacher and students and between peers and encouraging peer-to-peer interaction.
 - *Social dynamics*—This means observing the way students interact with each other and group themselves as well as observing the way the teacher groups students in terms of gender, race, and disability. Does the teacher call on some students more than others? How does the teacher work to include all students?
- **Materials**—These include dolls representing various races, cultures, and sexes, including Asian, African American, and Muslim; books accurately representing diverse communities; and pictures and videos that include people from different backgrounds.

Figure 1: Living Document

A Living Document: Your Anti-Bias Journey



(Please note this list is not exhaustive)

Source: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women

- **Dynamics**—Teachers plan mindful interactions among students with various backgrounds and characteristics; they address any progress or uncomfortable feelings or resistance openly as a class.
- **Course topics**—All courses can include a social justice component, including science, social studies, and math. Teachers can address famous female scientists; they can explore cultures or facts about history and current events. They can even make sure to use names from various cultures in math word problems.
- **Inclusion in our lesson plan template**—Our lesson plan template has a section reserved for social justice considerations. We observe students’ ability to embed social justice in their lessons and provide feedback or even share additional resources.

students are asked to convert and record on video the written responses in ASL. The questions we ask are in response to

Developing a Living Document Recognizing Resistance

The Living Document, a tool that helps measure and monitor student awareness of social justice, was developed by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. The Living Document also helped guide our own introspection. The exercise of completing the document—which represents different aspects of an individual human being, including gender, education, geographic origin, and ethnicity—enabled us to draw from a variety of sources and develop discussions that furthered our own self-reflection. (See Figure 1.)

We also used the Living Document with our students. We told them that it would help them document their individual journey toward understanding self, others, and the world. It would neither be graded nor corrected. The Living Document positions students to contemplate topics they may have never thought about, and it places social justice at the forefront of their thoughts. Over the first few courses, the Living Document presents the students with questions to answer privately in writing, such as: *What is privilege, and what are your privileges? What is social justice, and what are your responsibilities in supporting social justice? What does power have to do with fairness and justice?* Eventually,

Table 2. Moving Toward Social Justice: Questions to Spur Self-Reflection

We ask our students to contemplate the following questions and to eventually record their responses in ASL.

1. What is oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, ableism, audism, heteronormativity, classism) and what are its causes? What are the factors that create an imbalance of power within a culture?
2. Is it ever necessary to question the status quo? Why or why not? When is it appropriate to challenge the beliefs or values of society?
3. What is privilege and what are your privileges?
4. What is social justice and what are your responsibilities to support it?
5. What does power have to do with fairness and justice? Do we have choices concerning fairness and justice? What allows some individuals to take a stand against prejudice/oppression while others choose to participate in it?
6. What does it mean to be harmed by stereotypes or to be a member of a subordinated group? In what ways can subordinated groups keep the larger cultures aware of their issues?
7. When should an individual or a group take a stand against what he/she/ze/they believe to be an injustice in opposition to an individual and/or larger group? What do you view as the most effective ways to take a stand against injustices?
8. What are the benefits and consequences of questioning and challenging social order? How does conflict lead to change?
9. How did power, privilege, and oppression play out in the history of deaf education? What about the current state of deaf education? What do you think “liberation” means to deaf people of all identities in deaf education?
10. What is your subjectivity, positionality, and reflexivity to Deaf communities (or communities that you serve)? What is the potential harm of your presence and involvement in deaf education (or communities that you serve)?

Note: Several of the above questions were derived from <https://kennedysclass.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/essential-questions.pdf>.



contemplating oppression—including racism, sexism, audism, and classism—and their own responsibilities in fostering social justice within their communities and classrooms. (See Table 2.) After reading students’ responses, we have a better understanding of each student’s level of self-reflection and awareness. For example, working with the Living Documents allowed us to see that some students struggle with the idea of having cultural privileges. This finding guides our instruction by steering us toward the commitment of embedding lessons, stories, guest speakers, and readings to deepen these students’ awareness.

When students gain new information about social justice from our classes or experience beyond the classroom, they go back to their Living Documents to reflect on their experience. This process is recursive, becoming part of our ongoing anti-bias journey as teachers and students. Without a doubt, the Living Document assignment provides ample information about whether we are effective in weaving social justice into the design of all courses in the program.

The Living Document serves as a form of formative assessment. While in the thick of our courses, we use it to see how our students are progressing in their understanding of social justice. Additionally, while students are developing lesson plans, we pose questions on “social justice considerations” such as: *Does this lesson promote positive self-identity, encourage students to learn about who they are/where they come from/their heritage and/or identities, and/or help students recognize and develop language to describe unfairness in society? How can you assist (other) students in feeling safe or even brave to share this information with each other?*

Teaching the Teachers A Process of Learning

This process has brought us to some uncomfortable places; however, social justice is irrelevant when it is entirely theoretical and rooted in good feelings. What has helped us move through our disagreements, painful conversations, and feelings of disconnection in relationships and trust is our ongoing commitment to the vision of social justice. We understand that allyship—the concept that we can leverage individual and collective power to stand in support of individuals denied equality—is a verb and a journey in itself, which means we must continue to grow, learn, and repair relationships along the way as professionals working with each other and our students.

As we look back, we realize that our students may wonder if we are familiar enough with society’s injustices to look at issues through a social justice lens in our classes. Our students may even want to wait until we—and they—become “experts” in social justice. We gently remind them that social (in)justice happens every day regardless of what we do, that it is important for us to try to identify social injustice and combat it, and that making mistakes along the way is inevitable. It is our hope that current and future teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students gain the social consciousness and motivation to address issues of social injustice—and social justice—in their classrooms.

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