

# Social Justice Teaching Practices: A Case Study of a Latinx Pre-service Teacher in Urban Schools

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## Abstract

*Teacher education programs (TEPs) prepare educators to provide an environment conducive for student learning regardless of race, class, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. Drawing from a larger study, this single-unit case study examines the experience of a Latinx pre-service teacher instructor at an urban school. Specifically, we highlight her perceptions as compared to the experiences of her White female counterparts in urban schools. The findings suggest that she appeared to utilize social justice supportive pedagogy to position her interactions with and for students. The implications and recommendations are provided to strengthen the use of social justice approaches in clinical and field experiences.*

**Keywords:** *Social Justice Pedagogy, Teacher Educator Program, Urban Education*

Throughout the history of the United States, White teachers have had different perceptions of their students of color and subsequently treated them differently. Research dating back to Ray Rist's (1970) ethnography of kindergarten classrooms revealed that White teachers' expectations of their students were based primarily on perceived success factors that mirrored White, middle-class society. Alexander and Entwisle (1988) demonstrated that first-grade teachers responded differently to Black and White children who displayed the same behavior, which indicated that there existed different ways of interpreting child behavior based on ethnicity (Payette & Clarizio, 1994; Saft & Pianta, 2001). Nearly a decade later, Pigott and Cowen (2000) found that Black children were still being judged by teacher groups to have more serious school adjustment problems, fewer competencies, more negatively stereotypic personality qualities, and poorer educational prognoses than White children. Twenty years later, little has changed in teacher misperceptions concerning students of color, especially Black children. Many White kindergarten teachers continue to perceive Black students to have lower academic ability as well as lower levels of social and behavioral skills (Minor, 2014). White teachers still fail to appreciate students' sociocultural backgrounds (Stinson, 2006), misinterpret culturally specific academic behaviors (Hurley et al., 2005), and disparage the use of native language (Mellom et al., 2018). This can lead to the underrepresentation of gifted programming for students of color (Allen, 2017). White teachers are either blinded to community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as well as antiracist multicultural perspectives (Pitre & Adams, 2014), or underutilize localized funds of knowledge (Rios-Angular et al., 2011) from which students of color are often socialized. The cultural mismatch between students and racially incompetent teachers can significantly contribute to educational difficulties experienced by students of color (Gay, 2000; Milner 2003).

The same cultural competency disparity also exists among pre-service teachers. Not unlike their in-service predecessors, White pre-service teachers often enter their teacher educator programs (TEPs) with calcified misconceptions and stereotypes that have a negative impact on the socioemotional development and academic success of students of color (Hampton et al., 2008). Although considerable research has been devoted to mostly White pre-service teachers' perceptions of urban schools and how Whiteness maintains and enacts dominant racial ideologies (Picower, 2009); less attention, however, has been paid to Latinx pre-service teacher participants, who when they graduate, comprise nearly 9% of the teaching force in the US (NCES, 2019), second only to White females at 80%. While we know there is a body of literature about Latinx pre-service teacher candidates who seek

to become bilingual educators (Galindo, 1996; Clark & Flores, 2001; Flores, 2001; Flores et al., 2008), little is known about women from Latinx heritages and their experiences as pre-service teachers serving predominantly Black students.

As such, this study explores one pre-service Latina's experience as she navigates her TEP as an aspiring teacher situated at a public school in a predominantly Black community. Specifically, through interviews and focus groups, we highlight her perceptions as compared to the experiences of her White female counterparts in urban schools. While most TEPs aim to prepare educators to provide an environment conducive for student learning regardless of race, class, ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status, we argue the need for social justice in pre-service education to combat the implicit (and explicit) biases and misperceptions, especially of White pre-service teachers, about Black students who for many look different from their teachers. The qualitative case study is guided by the following question: *What is the experience of a Latinx pre-service teacher in a predominately Black urban school?* The purpose of the question is to allow researchers to determine whether a Latinx pre-service teacher employs instructional approaches that invoke tenets of social justice teaching and to understand and describe the ways in which she does so.

We extend the focus of the study by posing a secondary research question: *How do these experiences inform our understanding of how to prepare instructors to work in urban environments?* We frame the issue by briefly exploring both the conceptions of social justice teaching as a pedagogic instructional practice and the curriculum preparation of pre-service teachers to become educators. The remainder of the paper is divided into three sections: research methods, findings, and discussion/conclusion. We begin the conversation by describing the concept of social justice teaching.

## Conceptual Framework

A key unsolved problem in the literature regarding preparing pre-service teachers within urban settings is determining the extent to which interns are applying or are guided by such pedagogic approaches as social justice teaching to foster engaged instruction (Dover, 2013). In understanding social justice teaching, there is a tendency among scholars to focus on specific adherence to equity-based practices. For instance, Harding (1986) seminally provided the context of principled action. He explained political interests embedded in the formal and informal curriculum maintains the White status quo. Whereas Fraser (1997) noted infusing social justice throughout the curriculum is both redistributive

social justice and cognitive social justice. In other words, if educators want to address instruction within a context of social justice, then their teaching needs to question patriarchal structures and foster equity expansively (Gale & Densmore, 2000).

The philosophical structure for the present research focuses on social justice teaching, a strategy wherein educators participate in conscious reflection and action (Hawkins, 2014). The basis for social justice teaching holistically addresses structural inequities through instructional practice (Hawkins 2014). Additionally, Russo (2006) noted that teaching for social justice in today's classrooms can be seen as a necessity, resulting in the educator serving as a reform agent who confronts patterns of injustice through engaged instruction (Hooks, 2014). Dover (2009) argued that social justice pedagogy as a promotive perspective provides pragmatic tools to confront and address or redress educational mandates, set by city, state, and federal entities that may be inequitable. Dover further hypothesized that considerations for social justice teaching must include the following:

1. Assume all students are participants in knowledge construction
2. Acknowledge, value, and build students' existing knowledge, interests, culture, and linguistic resources
3. Teach targeted academic skills in order to bridge the gap in student learning
4. Partner with families and the surrounding community
5. Integrate assessment
6. Encourage activism to address power structures and inequities in the system

### **Curriculum Preparation of Pre-Service Teachers**

Dover's (2009) principles are necessary to infuse in teacher preparation programs. Milner, Tenore, and Laughter (2008) posited that teacher preparation programs, as they pertain to diverse student learners, need to be frequently evaluated. This is also the case with teaching for social justice. Milner et al. (2008), emphasized that TEPs should examine teacher knowledge, development, practice, and implementation. These tenets, too, are grounded in foundational equity and social justice teaching initiatives (Sleeter, 2017). As such, preparation programs and practitioners must utilize culturally relevant sustainable and social justice practices operationally. That is, they must develop robust mission statements, formulate inclusionary lesson plans, and present subject area class materials through a culturally relevant sustainable, social justice lens. Secondly, it is acknowledged that teacher

preparation programs should consider how clinical and field experiences might serve to connect social justice theory and its application in the classroom (Hollins, 2015). Taking these active steps towards teaching for social justice creates room for teacher self-efficacy to promote student learning (Lee & Smith, 1996). Doing so yields a more inclusive education, based on group instruction that counteracts skewed expectations and buttresses student achievement.

Moreover, this approach to teaching also allows the educator to engage in bilateral learning. Meaning, instructors are linking what they learned about the students and integrating lessons learned through adjustments in instruction. Self-awareness of beliefs and values is paramount for teachers as they interact with students from different backgrounds. It is important to be cognizant of students' thoughts and be reflective of instructional approaches. Additionally, the literature suggests there is a correlation between teacher preparation and student learning outcomes (Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014). Similarly, such pre-service experiences may have a particularly positive impact on first- and second-year teachers (Conklin, 2014). Thus, comprehensive teacher preparation programs are necessary for the development of effective new teachers and student learning outcomes. Equipping pre-service instructors to approach teaching through a social justice framework could be a key factor to facilitate an effective learning environment (Dover, 2009).

### **Case Analysis**

As a consequence of the exploratory aspect of this analysis, the researchers elected to treat the work qualitatively. A single case study design, with embedded sub-units situated from within a larger case to be analyzed between cases, was utilized (Yin, 2017). Additionally, because this study seeks to understand the perceptions of a Latinx pre-service instructor teaching in an urban locale, we identify Rosa (pseudonym) as the focus of the single case and her counterpart pre-service instructor colleagues as the study's sub-unit participants. The aforementioned design is a type of case study used to explore and describe a real-life contemporary phenomenon (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012; Yin, 2017).

### **Case Boundaries**

Having followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) guidelines, the case was bounded by three points of clarification. These clarifications, or boundaries, included settings, definition of social justice teaching, and activity. First, the setting for this case was the TEP clinical

internship sites. Clinical internship courses were located at a school site stationed in an urban community. The second case clarification was the understanding of social justice teaching. The definition of social justice instruction was characterized, for the purposes of this study, as a process of conscious reflection on teaching behavior (Dover, 2013). Finally, the third case clarification was the activity. The identified activity for this case study was instruction.

## **Method**

### **Data Sources**

Yin (2017) clarified that the main sources of evidence for case studies are key informants and key records, all of which were used as data sources for this research. The main informants for this research were internship pre-service instructors enrolled in the clinical and field experience course. The Clinical and Field Experiences director shared the study's call for participants. Informants were chosen to explain their experiences in urban schools. The records used in this research, journal entries, were a tertiary source of evidence to offer a deeper understanding of participant perceptions, expressed using their own wording.

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used to select the study's participant. Patton (1990) noted that the purposeful sampling approach enables researchers to select cases that are information rich. In keeping with the structure of a single case study with embedded units, data was collected from a single participant. Yet, to powerfully illuminate the case, consideration was given to sub-cases, other pre-service teachers, interning in the same environment to engage in a robust analysis related to the focus of this study. Thus, the primary research participant was Rosa, a Latinx participant within the study's cohort of seven pre-service teachers who were White females.

### **Data Collection**

Two data collections strategies were used for this study: focus group interview process and journal entries. For this study, data was collected over a semester-long basis and included focus group interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes. Additionally, bi-weekly self-reflection journal entries, as well as the participant's field notes were also

collected. Furthermore, interview questions about her internship experiences were semi-structured and open-ended.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the participant interviews followed the recommendations of Saldaña (2015) for thematic analysis. Saldaña (2015) explained that thematic analysis is a strategic analytical practice intended to describe the theme under investigation concept. As such the following analytic steps were employed. First, transcripts were read and reviewed. Reading and reviewing the data allowed the first author to get closer to the data and identify key quotes. Key quotes were grouped into categories associated with the research questions. Finally, the quotes were grouped into themes.

## **Findings**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the themes presented relate to two specific questions asked during the focus group: (1) How do you help your students with personal growth? (2) What advice would you give teachers about building relationships with student families? The questions allowed participants to generate a response regarding ways for which they supported student learners and interacted with learners' families.

### **Developing Student Learners**

We now turn our attention specifically to the responses of Rosa and her White counterparts. When asked how she supports the personal growth of students, Rosa's replies strongly reflected tenets that interconnect with social justice educational instructional practices. Additionally, the study's primary researcher learned that Rosa's positionality was proportional to her understanding of the students' needs as learners while also helping her empathize with students' concerns that were external to the learning environment. For example, Rosa's initial response to the first question reflected her desire to help students learn through goal-setting: "I want to be their helper; I sit with my students to see what they need (do), and we create goals to improve skills that are underdeveloped."

Another time, Rosa illustrated that supporting growth was more than academic learning. She shared, "If a kid comes in crying, I don't ridicule them, I just comfort them and say we are going to have a good day." Rosa also talked about conversational prompts regarding events taking place outside of the classroom that she utilized both to support students' growth and to demonstrate how students could use their out-of-classroom, local

experiences to help them in the classroom. For instance, she discussed a weekly practice asking her students to “tell me about your weekend” and described the resulting discussion. Likewise, she wanted her students to feel that the classroom was a participatory space where their voices were included in composing the classroom climate. Rosa stated, “When I see my students not following the rules, I will ask them what is a rule that you have at home that we can use in the classroom; I figure if it’s a rule they have at home it might encourage them to use that rule to help them be a well-behaved student in class.” Thus, her approach indicated that she was invested in supporting students’ cultural and personal growth in ways that incorporated learning activities and engagement strategies that centered on their social and emotional wellbeing by creating bonds with her students.

Many of Rosa’s pre-service counterparts, however, felt limited in knowing how to support the development of student’s cultural and personal growth. One participant described having difficulty thinking about personal growth of public-school students in lower-income schools: “I just hope I know what to do with them academically.” Other participants only linked student personal development one dimensionally; they promoted linking conceptions of development to teaching before knowing how to do so within the context of their role in the classroom. For instance, a participant noted in her response to “How do you help students with personal growth”: “The first thing that popped into my mind is I cannot help them personally; I expect that at a certain point most of my help, maybe all of it, will focus more on teaching.”

### **Situating Parent Engagement**

During the focus group, the White pre-service teachers, however reluctantly, perceived liabilities relating to incorporating parent communication or engaging parents as practice for what they might do as new or novice teachers. For instance, one participant noted that “Parents do not understand teacher jargon, during testing we want to know WPM (words read per minute) and student aggregate testing score. I feel bad for my parents because our ‘teacher talk’ goes right over their heads, and if you go in there and talk with them about this stuff you end up arguing about the terms they are not familiar with.” Another participant shared, “Parents scare me.” She continued, “I cannot reach them; we never have good numbers for *these* people.” She concluded with advice for herself and her pre-service peers, “Do not get overly involved with them—learn how to handle classroom problems yourself.”

During the focus group, Rosa sat quietly and listened to her peers' apprehensions. Finally, she illustrated that parent engagement can serve as an asset. Rosa provided feedback that quieted the room: "It's not about any of that; it's all about respect." The silence in the room provided Rosa with the opportunity to complete her thought and respond to the question:

I think you develop a relationship with the parent by making the parent feel appreciated. Include them in the conversation about helping their child. Be consistent. And I ask for their help. They know their kids better than we know them. We just have to figure out how we show them that their info about little Johnny goes a long way to help us.

## Discussion

This study provides evidence of the perceptions of pre-service teachers working in an urban school. In particular, though voices of several participants were included, special attention was given to Rosa—a Latinx pre-educator—to note the ways in which her perceptions differed from her White counterpart colleagues. Overall, the findings expand knowledge regarding attitudes and behaviors of pre-service teachers and advance conceptions of the meaningful interaction said instructors have working with Black students living and learning in urban settings (Maylor, 2009; Milner, & Howard, 2004; Sleeter, & Milner, 2011; Weiner, & Jerome, 2016). Further, the findings illustrate that the practice of pedagogical training is problematized by the fact that while pre-service teachers may perceivably know content, there remains the challenge of training instructors to interconnect subject area knowledge to operationalize tenets of social justice instruction. Thus, the ability to both instruct and guide students and cohesively engage students and families holistically is a professional skill which develops over time (Adams, 2007; Apple, 2012; Dover, 2013; Zeichner, 2014).

The embedded White participant responses provided additional insight that illustrated their perceptions connected to the shared interview questions and uncovered knowledge that cannot be overlooked. That is, social justice instruction remained a skill they acknowledged was important but instructional preparation "offered inconsistent guidance" (Research Participant). Uncovering gaps in social justice instructional approaches is vital to professional preparation of pre-service teachers. When Rosa spoke of

having respect, caring about, and supporting her urban school students as positive attributes associated with her teaching approach, her responses showed an awareness of social justice pedagogy (Kumashiro, 2015). Rosa's comments, in comparison to those of her White colleagues, make the results of this study important to the field of education and clinical practice as they pertain to Latinx pre-service teacher dispositions of teachers in urban schools.

## Conclusion

While the analysis of this study is limited, its findings have some possible implications for preparing pre-service teachers to learn and implement social justice teaching, particularly when teaching in diverse environments. Our participants' perspectives revealed that some pre-service teachers struggled considerably to incorporate teaching methods in line with the use of pedagogy for social justice. Indeed, the study found that the uses of social justice teaching by the Latinx pre-service instructor were significantly different from her peers, and she was the group's only minoritized pre-service instructor. Based on the results, we infer that the Latina pre-service instructor exhibited indicators of social justice instructional practices. Yet, the challenge moving forward is combating the implicit biases of pre-service teachers who might adversely affect student learners. As a result, finding ways to expand educators' approaches to the application of social justice pedagogy becomes more relevant for both scholars and practitioners. TEPs do an excellent job of training teachers to be professional in the subject matter.

Through observations such awareness can enhance teachers' ability to consistently apply pedagogy, within the framework of their curricula, that is informed by social justice. TEPs must examine how they maintain consistent standards for the clinical and field interactions that make clear how subject awareness should be learned as it is situated in social justice education. Furthermore, we posit that prospective educators should develop intellectual prowess drawn from a profound conviction that education is a force that promotes students' academic success and fosters instructional approaches that invoke social justice teaching practices. This study's findings pertaining to its sole Latinx participant provides an approach that can be broadly used by pre-service teachers to actively implement the pedagogy of social justice within an urban K-12 classroom.

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