



“I’ve Never Really Thought About Social Justice in the Classroom”

White Mentor Teacher Learning About Social Justice Through Sustained Professional Development

Amy R. Guenther & Lindsay J. Wexler

Abstract

Preparing teachers to provide an equitable and socially just education has become a focus for many teacher preparation programs across the country. Yet, relatively little research attention has been given to the role of mentor teachers—the people who student teachers identify as most influential in their learning to teach—in this work. This study examined White mentor teachers’ shifts in thinking and actions during a particular professional learning opportunity—a Mentor Study Group focused on mentoring for social justice. Findings demonstrate both the importance of this work and a path forward for doing this work in the context of a teacher preparation program.

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Introduction

Preparing teachers to provide an equitable and socially just education has become a focus of many teacher preparation programs (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). Yet, relatively little attention has been given to the role of mentor teachers (MTs)—the people who student teachers (STs) identify as most influential in their learning to teach (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; Feiman-Nemser, 2001)—in this work. As the vast majority of the teaching population is White (79%) and female (76%; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), it stands to reason the vast majority of mentors of STs are also White and female. And, as social justice has only recently become a focus in teacher preparation, it is unlikely these MTs themselves have been prepared to teach in equitable and socially just ways. As Sara,¹ a White teacher with 9 years of experience and 4 years of mentoring STs, admitted early in this study, “I’ve never really thought about social justice in the classroom.”

Considering MTs’ influence on STs’ teaching, it seems imperative for teacher preparation programs to provide professional learning opportunities for MTs to learn about social justice and how to support STs to enact social justice in their classrooms. This qualitative study examined shifts in five White MTs’ thinking and actions, both personally and professionally, related to social justice through their participation in a Mentor Study Group (MSG) focused on mentoring for social justice. The MSG was a professional learning opportunity facilitated by university personnel as part of an elementary teacher preparation program at a large university in the Midwest.

Literature Review

Mentor Study Groups

MSGs are inquiry-based learning communities in which MTs and university-based teacher educators collaboratively examine their mentoring practice to facilitate educative experiences for their mentees (Guenther, Wexler, Brondyk, Stanulis, & Pylman, 2020). This “educative mentoring” helps novices “continue learning in and from their practice” (Feiman-Nemser, 1998, p. 66). Similarly, MSGs are structured to encourage MTs to continue learning in and from their mentoring (and teaching) practice. Based on Dewey’s (1938/1997) notion of educative experiences, MSGs build on participants’ previous experiences and prepare them for future learning through mediated interactions that move them toward the goal of educative mentoring. Informed by the theory of assisted performance, MSGs are designed to support learners in “engag[ing] in levels of activity that could not be managed alone” through the assistance of a more experienced other (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 28). Thus, each MSG session incorporates the process of assisted performance—identifying current performance levels, structuring educative situations,

scaffolding support, and preparing for unassisted performance (Stanulis, Brondyk, Little, & Wibbens, 2014). Lastly, MSGs are intended for professional learning, the “internal process in which individuals create professional knowledge through interaction with this information in a way that challenges previous assumptions and creates new meaning” (Timperley, 2011, p. 5). Yoon (2012) found teacher study groups to be spaces for teachers to talk about equity and race. We hoped, through this intentionally structured learning experience (MSGs), MTs would challenge their previous assumptions about social justice, equity, race, and oppression and create new meaning around these concepts that would inform their mentoring.

Key Definitions

Utilizing *Is Everyone Really Equal?* as a foundational text in our MSG, Sensoy and DiAngelo’s (2017) descriptions of oppression, racism, and critical social justice informed our work within the MSGs and our research. They defined *oppression* as “the discrimination of one social group against another, backed by institutional power” (p. 61). While we discussed several forms of oppression within the MSG, our primary focus was racism because, as Milner (2010) contended, “too many educators gloss over race as an important area of consideration in broader diversity discourses” (p. 7). Furthermore, race and racism are topics often considered taboo in the United States and ones teachers often feel uncomfortable and/or unprepared to address (Kaplowitz, Griffin, & Seyka, 2019; Milner, 2010).

We ascribe to the belief that race is a social construct (Lalik & Hinchman, 2001; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and follow Kendi’s (2019) notion that any idea that suggests a group of people are inferior or superior to another based on their race is racist. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) defined *racism* in the U.S. context as “racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination supported by institutional power of Whites . . . that systemize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between Whites and peoples of Color” (p. 125). Similarly, Kendi (2019) highlighted the systemic and systematic nature of racism, defining racism as “a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas” (p. 20). Like Kaplowitz et al. (2019), Kendi (2019), and Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), we contend racism is much more than individual acts; it is an all-encompassing system within society that creates and maintains racial disparity.

To enact critical social justice work, we believe an understanding of oppression and racism is necessary. This perspective is based in a recognition that “society is *stratified* . . . in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. xx). A critical social justice framework works to change these systemic structures and beliefs. Sensoy and DiAngelo emphasized that *critical social justice* requires acknowledgment of the variety and depth of stratification within society and efforts

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to challenge the inequalities created by this stratification. We promoted critical social justice—an understanding of concepts and related actions—in the MSG in an effort to influence the MTs’ thinking and practices. In our writing and in our work with MTs, we also included equity within the larger conversations on social justice. As Achinstein and Athanases (2005) posited,

also necessary is challenging current inequitable practices to transform schools into more socially just and equitable systems. . . . Understanding diversity and equity issues . . . requires knowledge of structural inequities that persist in larger societal contexts in which schools are situated. (p. 845)

Thus, when equity is connected to critical social justice, equity is about creating transformative educational spaces where hierarchies are challenged and disrupted. We hoped to provide the kind of professional learning experiences that would encourage and support the MTs to do both.

Mentoring Toward Social Justice Teaching

We drew on Picower’s (2012) framework of social justice curriculum design to explicate what social justice teaching at the elementary level includes. The six elements of social justice curriculum design she articulated include teaching (a) self-love and knowledge, which allow students to learn about themselves, their families, and their community; (b) respect for others, encouraging students to listen to and learn from their classmates’ experiences; (c) issues of social injustice, allowing students the opportunity to see how different forms of oppression have historically (and currently) impacted themselves and others; (d) social movements and social change, providing students the chance to see how people throughout history have addressed the issues of social justice and worked toward change; (e) awareness raising, helping students to share with others outside of their classrooms about social justice issues they have learned to care about; and (f) social action, supporting students to do something to make change (Picower, 2012). We entered our work with the MTs with this conceptualization of social justice teaching in mind, hoping to help MTs enact, and create spaces for STs to enact, this type of teaching.

While much research has examined the role of mentoring in novice teacher learning (e.g., Goldrick, Osta, Barlin, & Burn, 2012; Hong & Matsko, 2019; Wexler, 2019, 2020a, 2020b), very little research has explored mentoring for social justice in teacher education or, more specifically, how to support MTs in this work. Through two thematic literature reviews, Duckworth and Maxwell (2015) highlighted the role of the mentor in supporting novice teachers in social justice practices and the need for mentor training to allow them to engage in this work. Similarly, Roegman, Reagan, Goodwin, Lee, and Vernikoff (2021) placed responsibility in the hands of teacher education programs to develop professional development for MTs for enacting social justice.

Achinstein and Athanases (2005) identified a knowledge base for equity-

focused mentoring that includes pedagogical knowledge for equity—both ways to teach diverse students and ways to mentor new teachers in (a) promoting equitable learning, (b) knowledge of contexts relevant to teaching diverse youth, (c) knowledge of learners relating to diversity and equity, and (d) knowledge of one’s self as it relates to diversity and equity. They explained, “As a mentor, one must use an instructional repertoire that is informed by an understanding of larger social contexts that have shaped educational inequities [and] cultural norms for learning . . . and how they play out in class” (p. 858). In other words, a MT must be aware of the roles oppressive institutions and White norms for learning play in creating opportunity gaps for students of marginalized groups and “be comfortable discussing these issues openly and honestly” (p. 852). Lastly, most relevant to our study and, perhaps, most critical to mentoring for social justice, a mentor must be self-reflective, considering one’s own positions and prejudices. Self-reflection is important for teachers, because “knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 181). This critical self-reflection is necessary to improve the educational experience of students of Color (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Additionally, reflective practice allows mentors to process, understand, and act on the complexities of teaching (Guenther et al., 2020; Rodgers & LaBoskey, 2016; Wexler, 2020b), particularly when teaching students whose lived experiences differ from their own.

Whiteness and Education

Understanding one’s Whiteness is necessary for White educators to address racism and promote antiracist teaching (Matias & Mackey, 2016). Being White is conceptualized as more than race; Whiteness in society operates as a “process or a system of domination that privileges people perceived to be white over people of color” (Yoon, 2012, p. 589). Whiteness is related to White supremacy and its associated privileges in society (Picower, 2009). Especially to White people, those who benefit from the privileges associated with their race, Whiteness can be invisible (Applebaum, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Yoon, 2012). As Ladson-Billings (2001) stated, “notions of Whiteness are taken for granted. They rarely are interrogated. But being White is not merely about biology. It is about choosing a system of privilege and power” (p. 81). White educators learning about the privileges associated with their Whiteness (economic, political, housing, etc.) need to “acknowledge there will be emotional discomfort in this type of work” to truly commit to racial justice in their teaching (Matias & Mackey, 2016, p. 34). Without doing the work of learning the history of race and systems of power, White educators may take on the (problematic) role of White savior in the hope of supporting their students (Matias, 2013). For these reasons, explicitly addressing Whiteness is a critical beginning step in supporting White teachers to become more racially just educators.

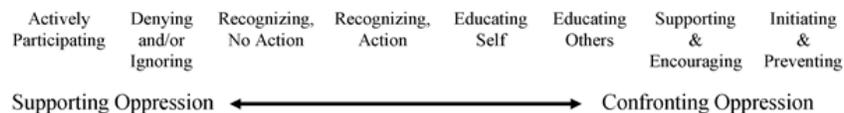
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Importantly, “teachers, many of whom are white, should begin to shoulder some of the burden of race” (Matias & Mackey, 2016, p. 48); just as it is not the job of students of Color to educate White students about inequity in schools, it is not the job of teachers of Color to educate White teachers about race-related issues (unless they are paid for and/or choose to do this work). In this study, we entered this space as White allies, working to better understand Whiteness along with the mentors.

Theoretical Considerations

To investigate MTs’ change in understanding and practice, we utilized both the Action Continuum and the Spheres of Influence (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997) in our analysis. The Action Continuum (see Figure 1) consists of eight types of responses to oppression spanning from supporting oppression on one end to confronting oppression on the other end. While this continuum can refer to both individual and collective actions (Singh & Salazar, 2010), we focused on the actions of individuals for our analysis and, therefore, describe the continuum in terms of the individual. Beginning on the far end of supporting oppression, the first point (*actively participating*) refers to intentional actions a person takes to avoid, discriminate against, or harass target group members. At the second point (*denying and/or ignoring*), an individual enables and colludes with oppression by denying or ignoring its existence. The third point (*recognizing, no action*) refers to an awareness of oppressive acts but an inaction to stop them due to fear and/or a lack of knowledge and/or skills, whereas, at the fourth point (*recognizing, action*), actions are taken to disrupt them. Moving along the continuum, at the fifth and sixth points (*educating self* and *educating others*, respectively), the individual actively engages in learning more about oppression and ways to address it and then uses this knowledge to dialogue with and educate others. The seventh point (*supporting, encouraging*) involves becoming an ally to those who work against oppression. Lastly, on the far end of confronting oppression, at the eighth point (*initiating, preventing*), a person actively works to change “individual and institutional actions and policies that perpetuate injustices against members of marginalized groups” (Singh & Salazar, 2010, p. 316). While this action continuum applies to many forms of oppression, we specifically utilized it for racism. We noted the MTs’ place along the continuum because, as Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love (1997) stated, “a

Figure 1
Action Continuum (Adams et al., 1997)

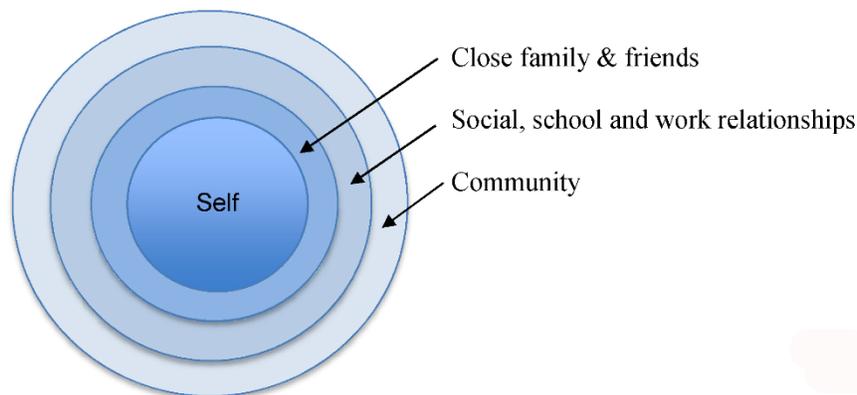


person's place on the Action Continuum [is] a function of her or his awareness of racism, readiness, and willingness to take action, and where he or she is in terms of personal comfort zone" (p. 103).

We also utilized the Spheres of Influence (see Figure 2) in our analysis. This framework consists of four broadening concentric circles that identify one's various spheres of influence beginning with one's self and expanding out to one's larger community. These circles reflect how individuals "can be change agents in different arenas in their lives" (Kaplowitz et al., 2019, p. 176). In the inner circle, where a person has the most influence, the focus is on oneself and making changes through the examination of one's own values and feelings and by educating oneself based on desired changes. Moving outward by degree of influence, the circles include one's close family and friends; the people with whom one interacts on a regular basis through social, school, and work associations; and finally, the people with whom one has infrequent encounters or one's community at large.

Scholars have used the Action Continuum to plan professional development and assess participant progress in teacher education coursework (Adams et al., 1997), group work (Kaplowitz et al., 2019; Singh & Salazar, 2010), and educational leadership (M. McIntosh, 2020) focused on social justice. Recognizing that enacting critical social justice is a process and hoping the MTs would gain new knowledge and skills from the MSG to effect change in their STs' practices, we used the Action Continuum and Spheres of Influence to analyze ways the MTs shifted in their thinking and actions regarding social justice and influenced others, including (potentially) their STs.

Figure 2
Spheres of Influence (Adams et al., 1997)



Methods and Data Sources

This qualitative case study builds on prior research (Pylman, Stanulis, & Wexler, 2017; Stanulis et al., 2019) that found that MSGs can be a site of professional learning for MTs to develop educative mentoring practices. Case study involves in-depth analysis as the case unfolds in real life (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Here, we explored White MTs’ learning regarding mentoring for social justice in the context of an MSG. Specifically, we looked for changes in the MTs’ perspectives and actions related to social justice. This MSG represents the unique case.

Participants and Context

Participants (see Table 1) in this study were five White females who had previously participated in MSGs focused on educative mentoring practices. They were five of eight MTs invited to participate in this MSG iteration because of their commitment to teacher development and their desire to continue growing as professionals. These MTs taught in schools with varying demographics, particularly in regard to racial/ethnic makeup, and were representative of the MTs within our elementary teacher preparation program and the teachers in their respective schools. Notably,

Table 1
Participant Demographics

<i>Participant^a</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Years teaching</i>	<i>Years in role</i>	<i>Teaching context</i>	<i>Classroom racial demographics</i>
Jane	MT	13	3	Urban, first grade	38.9% African American 22.2% White 22.2% Hispanic 16.7% multiracial
Mia	MT	20	5	Suburban, first grade	4.3 % African American 17.4% Asian 78.3% White
Nora	MT	12	6	Suburban, first grade	13% African American 8.7% Asian 73.9% White 4.3% Native Hawaiian
Sara	MT	9	4	Urban, first grade	41.2% African American 17.6% White 11.8% Hispanic 29.4% multiracial
Tara	MT	17	4	Rural, third grade	30% African American 10% Asian 60% White

Note. MT = mentor teacher.

^aAll names are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

we did not seek out a MT of Color to participate because it is not the responsibility of teachers of Color to educate their White colleagues (Venzant Chambers, Carter Andrews, Hadley Dunn, & Phelps-Moultrie, 2020), and we did not want to position a MT of Color in this way. These MTs, along with a university field instructor who also identified as a White female, participated in monthly MSG sessions led by a university-based facilitator (Author 1) over the 2018–2019 school year.

The seven MSG sessions were each approximately 1.5–2 hours long and were held both in the MTs' schools and homes. The facilitator led each session, utilizing semistructured agendas developed with input from MSG participants and in response to the previous month's conversation (see Table 2). The facilitator, university

Table 2
MSG Session Topics/Activities

<i>Session</i>	<i>Activities and main topics of discussion</i>
1 (September 2018)	Introductions, overview of MSG, “Confronting the Lies I Tell Myself” (Berlin & Berry, 2018)
2 (October 2018)	Reflections from Session 1, defining social justice, “White Teachers and School Reform” (Howard, 2006), conversations MTs had with STs about equity and diversity, observing and debriefing with social justice in mind
3 (November 2018)	Reflections from Session 2, <i>The Danger of a Single Story</i> (Adichie, 2009), “Three Miles” (Joffre-Walt, 2015), observations from watching commercials during network television show, differences in acceptable/desired behavior in various cultural groups
4 (January 2019)	Reflections from Session 3, prologue and Chapter 1 in <i>Is Everyone Really Equal?</i> (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), television shows and movies with Black characters (e.g., <i>Blackish</i> and <i>The Hate U Give</i>), classroom book inventory, analysis of student work with social justice in mind
5 (February 2019)	Reflections from Session 4, Chapters 2 and 3 in <i>Is Everyone Really Equal?</i> (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), “We Don’t Only Need More Diverse Books. We Need More Diverse Books Like <i>The Snowy Day</i> ” (Alam, 2016), sharing of children’s books featuring a diverse range of characters, coplanning with social justice in mind
6 (March 2019)	Reflections from Session 5, Chapters 4 and 5 in <i>Is Everyone Really Equal?</i> (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), <i>13th</i> (DuVernay, 2016), “The Complexity of Identity” (Tatum, 2000), our own identities and the privileges afforded to certain identities
7 (April 2019)	Reflections from Session 6, Chapter 12 in <i>Is Everyone Really Equal?</i> (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), next steps for acting upon what was learned

Note. MT = mentor teacher. ST = student teacher.

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supervisor, and MTs discussed readings related to (racial) equity and social justice, shared classroom experiences pertaining to working toward equitable classrooms, reflected on their work with their STs, commented on events in the news pertaining to social justice, and tasked themselves with action items to do/try prior to the next session. Each session began with participants sharing what they had done since the last meeting, conversations they had had with family members and colleagues following the MSG, and how their own ideas were developing relating to social justice. Each MSG session followed a cycle of sharing, learning, and goal setting.

Author Positionality

As White researchers doing work in the context of social justice, we (Authors 1 and 2) are cognizant of Milner’s (2007) call to pay attention to who we are in this work as we pursue “deeper racial and cultural knowledge” (p. 388) about ourselves and our participants. We identify as White, female teacher educators. We are interested in how MSGs can support White mentors and, in turn, teacher candidates to enact social justice teaching. Prior to the MSG under study, we facilitated MSGs that focused on educative mentoring, with Author 1 having engaged directly or indirectly with all of the current participants. Author 1 saw this MSG as an opportunity for joint inquiry into the socialization of White teachers and as an opportunity to move herself and the MTs toward confronting racial oppression. As a former elementary teacher and current assistant professor, Author 2 saw this research as a way to examine her own Whiteness and reflect on the role it played, and continues to play, in her teaching. Though neither of us held power in the MTs’ position as teacher or mentor, it is possible the MTs viewed Author 1 as having power due to her leadership in MSG facilitation. By exhibiting her own vulnerability and openness in discussions about race and privilege, she worked to alleviate notions of power in these relationships.

Data Sources and Analysis

To identify changes in the MTs’ perspectives and actions related to social justice, we examined data from several sources. These sources included transcriptions of the MTs’ semistructured pre- and post-interviews (30–60 minutes each; see the appendix), which we conducted the month prior to the beginning of the MSG and the month after the conclusion of the MSG, respectively. We also analyzed the MTs’ journal entries containing reflections about MSG readings and discussions and their mentoring practices (3–6 entries per participant); our researchers’ time-stamped notes, including direct quotes, from viewing the video recordings of the seven MSG sessions (90–120 minutes each); and the facilitator’s (Author 1’s) field notes written after each MSG session.

For our analysis, we first identified initial codes by comparing pre- and post-MSG interviews using open coding (Saldaña, 2009). Together, we examined

participant interviews to understand if the way they spoke about social justice and equity shifted throughout the year. We attended to the location of the changes, noting that some participants focused on the personal, whereas others spoke mostly about the professional. At this stage, examples of codes included culture shock, desire to learn, insecurity, passive responsibility, shame, and uneasiness.

We then considered our theoretical framework and organized codes into Action Continuum categories. Together, we created category headings that included each stage from the Action Continuum and then attempted to sort our codes from the first round of coding into these categories. For example, the codes “whose job is it?” and “need for ‘others’ to be aware” were placed in the category “recognizing oppression, no action,” and the codes “desire to learn/stance of a learner” and “actively looking to learn and grow” were placed in the category “educating self.” After categorizing our initial codes into this continuum together, Authors 1 and 2 went through the entire set of data for one participant (including written reflections from participants, time-stamped notes from MSG recordings, and Author 1’s field notes) to ensure we had a similar understanding of the codes. Then, we divided the remaining participants in half, and each of us coded two participants’ data in their entirety. We utilized a shared Google document to capture relevant participant quotes and also kept memos of our overall perceptions of each individual.

As we looked through our codes and categories together, we determined that it was important to add spheres of influence within the continuum to move to themes and theory (Saldaña, 2009). For example, “recognizing and taking action” occurred first through “educating self.” Additionally, we began noting where the experiences of the participants did not stay neatly confined to the continuum’s path or where it appeared they were making important, but not clearly defined, shifts across the continuum. For example, we noticed examples of participants realizing their own lack of awareness relating to equity and social justice, and this seemed worthwhile to call out as a separate, important stage, separate from recognizing oppression. Through the data analysis process, we adapted the Action Continuum to represent the experiences of these MTs as they shifted in their beliefs and actions, which we present as one of our findings. Utilizing this iterative coding process, we together looked across data sources to understand how MTs talked about social justice over the year and indications of movement along the Action Continuum and within the Spheres of Influence. We looked for “key linkages” among data sources (Erickson, 1986, p. 147) and present only findings supported by multiple sources and/or perspectives.

Findings

Three main findings emerged from our analysis. First, through their participation in the MSG, the MTs gradually moved along the Action Continuum on a general trajectory toward confronting oppression and expanded their spheres of influence. Second, the MTs’ shift in beliefs and actions was a complex, nonlinear process. Fi-

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nally, for the MTs in our study, the process of change from supporting to confronting oppression included additional, unique points along the Action Continuum.

Shifting Along the Action Continuum and Expanding Influence

Our MTs began the MSG unable to define social justice, identifying this inability as a reason for wanting to be part of the MSG. Throughout the year, they grappled with new vocabulary and related concepts (i.e., able-bodied, cis-gender, equity, social justice); understanding the words and ideas was challenging for the MTs, who, up until this point, had not experienced professional learning that put their identities (both personal and professional) into question. The MTs moved on a general trajectory from a lack of awareness of oppression to awareness with some small steps of action. As their awareness of their own privilege and understanding of social justice increased, their sense of ownership for addressing oppression increased. With this, participants—in various ways, at varying times, and to varying degrees—saw a shift in who was responsible for making change, which led to varying degrees of action.

The starting point. The MTs began the year conceptualizing social justice to be about fairness and a general idea of supporting each student to be successful academically. For example, Sara defined social justice as follows: “Everybody getting what they need in order to be successful, whether that is resources or time. Everybody having a chance to share their opinions and ideas, their thoughts” (pre-interview). Similarly, Mia stated that social justice is about

every child getting what they need in order to be successful in the classroom, successful in life. And it means something different for every child. No child is the same; therefore, their supports, their education should not be the same. (pre-interview)

These descriptions, common across participants, alluded to aspects of equity but were generic and inattentive to race. While we did not ask specifically about race in the pre-interviews, it is noteworthy that none of the MTs mentioned race when discussing social justice.

In addition to not identifying race as an aspect of social justice, the MTs did not initially recognize their own White privilege. As MTs discussed *Is Everyone Really Equal?* (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), watched the TED talk “The Danger of a Single Story” (Adichie, 2009), and read “Confronting the Lies I Tell Myself” (Berlin & Berry, 2018) in the initial MSG sessions, they began discussing Whiteness. In the second session, spurred by readings from the MSG, Nora questioned, “What does me being White have to do with this? . . . I know it plays into it, [but] it’s not clear to me how.” The MTs’ lack of awareness of their Whiteness had blinded them to the fact that race-related oppression exists and to their role in that oppression.

Developing awareness, increasing ownership, and accepting responsibility. Through conversations and reflections, the MTs began examining their Whiteness

and the privileges that accompany it. This was exemplified in the third MSG session when Tara reflected, “I feel much more aware and am trying to be more cognizant of the world surrounding me rather than what I know and have grown up believing.” In her post-interview, Nora shared that, through the MSG, she learned “that I am super privileged. I learned that, or I became aware of that, in ways that I never even thought of.” Tara, Nora, and the other MTs investigated, and learned about, ways they were enculturated and socialized to reinforce an oppressive system.

As the MTs developed awareness of their own privileges, biases, and beliefs, they began to take ownership of their actions and accept responsibility for acts of oppression and inaction. First, this included recognizing oppressive actions, first in others and then in themselves. Then, they began taking action to stop oppression, which primarily took the form of educating themselves and their families.

Recognizing oppression. The MSG facilitator asked the MTs to pay attention to race in commercials, to perspectives shared in television shows and TED talks, to their own experiences with police, and to the books in their classroom libraries. One specific task MTs were asked to do was to inventory their classroom libraries and note racial representation of characters. Each MT returned to the MSG with surprise and frustration about how White their libraries were and how characters of Color were portrayed. Tara shared,

I had never really thought about my classroom library before and how it might be representative of a certain group. After going through the books, I was surprised and disheartened to find that the majority of the books were geared towards Caucasians. (written reflection following MSG 3)

Through examination of their classroom libraries, the MTs became aware of their unintended oppression of students in their class who were not White.

Taking action by educating self. Although each MT entered the MSG voluntarily and with a desire to learn, acting on that desire was an important step away from inaction toward action. This involved questioning previously held beliefs and working to learn more in order to change. After taking an inventory of her classroom library, Jane shared,

What I was surprised on was the books I found that, to me, I thought were multicultural were really not multicultural. A lot of them were written by like White authors and so is that really culturally relevant? If it's written not by the culture that's represented in the book? By a White author? (post-interview)

This is more than recognizing that the books in the classroom do not represent the students in the classroom (*recognizing oppression*). As Jane discussed and reflected on cultural relevancy, she questioned her own practices. This shows her work in educating herself to move away from oppression toward action. Also indicating efforts toward self-education, Tara noted in a journal reflection, “The conversation

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today has me again thinking about how I need to be more aware and I might need to make a list of stereotypes and/or judgments that I hold so I can address these.” In both cases, the MTs were taking action by educating themselves.

MTs had started the MSG asking if a person of Color could be part of the discussion to provide their perspective. As the meetings progressed, the MTs continued to desire the voice of non-White participants but began to accept responsibility for their own learning. In the post-interview, Nora shared, “In the end, it’s not anybody’s responsibility but mine to find a way to open up . . . those perspectives and bring them into my classroom . . . or my life.” Through educating herself, she was able to accept responsibility. Through accepting responsibility, she continued to educate herself. This cycle is important for movement toward action.

Educating others. Within the MSG, the MTs largely focused on “self” within the Spheres of Influence (Adams et al., 1997), working to self-educate, reflect, be curious, and question. However, their spheres also expanded throughout the course of the year as they explored ideas of social justice with their partners, children, and close colleagues, including their STs. They shared MSG conversations, asked questions about beliefs and experiences, and pushed these close relations to explore ideas similar to those they had discussed in their MSG. For example, Nora engaged her partner in dialogue about “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (P. McIntosh, 2004), looking together at the checklist of White privilege. She explained,

I read it, and [my partner] would want to argue with every single one! And I’m like, “It’s yes or no! Yes or no.” And they were all “yes,” and I’m like, “There are people that say no to every single one of the things you just easily said yes to.” I think it’s just important to recognize that. (post-interview)

By engaging her partner in conversation about his privileges, she was working to educate him to recognize oppression. Each participant shared examples of conversations she had at home with her partners or children that initiated from an MSG conversation, continuing to reflect with their loved ones while also working to educate them. Beyond her family, Sara engaged others in dialogue about oppression. She explained,

[In a local school production of] *Lion King*, there was one Black child, and he had a part where he stood in the back corner and twirled some birds. And I made the comment, “Wow! That’s what you do with your one non-White child!” And I got some dirty looks from the people around me. But I think it’s just I’m so much more aware of it now. (post-interview)

Sara recognized how the one person of Color was portrayed and shared her objections with those around her. She did not know the other people but felt strongly that the action needed to be recognized by others.

Most MT examples of engaging in social justice–related dialogue and action

occurred within the first two Spheres of Influence. Additionally, the MTs were still in the early stages of the Action Continuum after participating in the MSG for several months. However, the shift to awareness with movement toward action, including an influence on others, is noticeable and important to recognize. This movement suggests the importance of continued conversations of social justice to provide MTs a stronger foundation that would support them to act in their schools and communities.

The Process of Change Is Complex and Nonlinear

With arrows at each end pointed in opposite directions, the Action Continuum highlights the bidirectionality of engaging in efforts to address oppression. As suggested by the word *continuum*, one's actions oscillate between points, moving forward and backward on the continuum rather than stage by stage in a linear fashion. We found this to be the case with the MT teachers as they progressed on a general trajectory toward confronting oppression in this process of change. Working to reconcile new information with long-standing societal enculturation was a complex process for them. They were actively learning about equity, social justice, and oppression, while continuing to harbor oppressive views. For example, as Nora engaged in dialogue during the second MSG session, she stated, "I feel like this whole thing is I'm White and that somehow negatively impacts my students, but I'm White. I can't do anything about it." Nora's recognition that race plays a role in her relationship with and understanding of her students suggests movement toward confronting oppression, yet her suggestion of nonaction because she cannot change her Whiteness seemingly keeps her in a state of supporting oppression.

Mia's words and actions also demonstrate this oscillation. The way Mia engaged in dialogue during the MSG, the comments she shared about at-home conversations following MSGs, and her written reflections suggest Mia shifted along the Action Continuum. She even stated, "I felt like every time I walked in I felt like I had a good understanding, but I walked out thinking, 'I know nothing.' [laughs] And it's just . . . it just opens your eyes in ways you don't think about. . . . It's just changed my thinking" (post-interview). Yet, in the last MSG session, Mia asked, "How do we do this? How do we have the time to learn more about [social justice]?" This question suggests Mia was overwhelmed by the process of learning and changing; she understood that it needed dedicated time and space but saw this as a major hurdle. So, while her thinking shifted toward addressing oppression, her actions did not necessarily move in that direction.

Throughout the year, the MTs questioned whose job it was to provide the perspectives of others and make changes. As shared earlier, Nora came to recognize the responsibility as her own, whereas other MTs continued to desire the presence of a person of Color in attendance at MSG sessions. They wanted someone to

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provide the perspective of a person of Color to the conversation and support their own shift on the continuum. In the post-interview, Jane shared

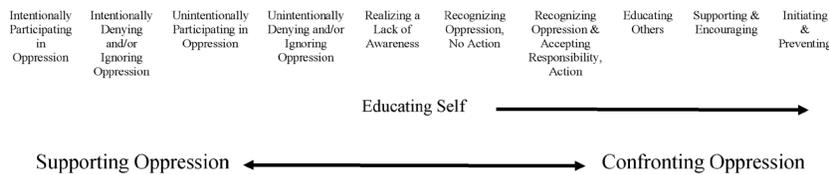
It was really interesting to me that the group was all White, like made up of White females. It would be interesting to bring in . . . like a Black female or a Black educator to learn about their experiences.

Even after conversation over the year about the additional challenges people of Color face, some MTs continued to feel it was the job of another to support their growth. But suggesting it is the job of a person of Color to help a White teacher recognize oppression is problematic. Though the MTs shifted on the Action Continuum in many ways, they, like many of us, continue to have some oppressive beliefs and practices, as they (we) continue learning and moving toward more antiracist orientations and actions. As such, these examples highlight the complexity of change and the nonlinear path it follows.

Introducing an Adapted Model

As we analyzed the data, we began noticing intermediary points of action that were not part of the Action Continuum yet seemed crucial to the MTs’ progress in mentoring for social justice. Here we present and discuss a modified action continuum (see Figure 3). We begin on the far end of supporting oppression with the first two points, *actively participating in oppression* and *denying or ignoring oppression*. We added the word “intentionally” to these first two points and then added the next two categories, *unintentionally actively participating in oppression* and *unintentionally denying or ignoring oppression*, to delineate intent. The MTs in this study did not intentionally commit racist acts, nor were they intentionally denying or ignoring the existence of racism. Their actions did not come from a place of hate. Rather, due to a lack of awareness (largely due to their White privilege and enculturation), they were unintentionally actively participating in acts of racism and denying and/or ignoring acts of racism. As Mia explained, “[the MSG] just opens your eyes in ways you don’t think about. For example, just being White and privileged because I’m White. And that I [didn’t] think about that” (post-interview). Jane also reflected, “I never realized how White privileged I am” (written reflection). These MTs were unaware of the role of Whiteness in racial oppression.

Figure 3
Adapted Action Continuum



While we recognize that the damage caused by intentional and unintentional actions is potentially the same, regardless of intent, there are important implications for fostering professional learning that necessitate delineating between the two types of actions. A participant whose actions are based on hate is very different from one whose actions result from a lack of awareness. Had the MTs been intentionally acting from a place of hate, this could have made the MSG conversations more adversarial, presenting different challenges for the facilitator. Furthermore, it is less likely the MTs' thinking and behaviors would have changed as much or moved as far along on the Action Continuum.

In moving from unintentionally supporting racism to recognizing racism, we identified another critical step in the MTs' learning: *realizing a lack of awareness*. While the MTs entered the MSG with a desire to learn about social justice and what that might mean for them as MTs, Mia questioned, "How do we know what we don't know?" (MSG 2). Through their participation in the MSG, they became cognizant of their lack of awareness of the racism happening around them. Realizing their lack of awareness made them more open to recognizing racism when examples were presented and discussed in the MSG and motivated them to begin to look for acts of racism around them. Thus, realizing there was much more they needed to learn than they had initially thought was both a motivator and a precursor for the next point on the continuum, *recognizing oppression*.

At first, the MTs recognized the racist acts of others and then, upon reflection, began to see the role they were playing in supporting racism (such as the Whiteness of their classroom libraries and how this deprived students of Color representation in books). This shift from not recognizing racism to recognizing it in the actions of others to recognizing it in their own actions was key to moving from supporting oppression to confronting oppression. Echoing the sentiments of the other MTs, Mia shared, "I can't turn it off anymore. . . . [I am] constantly thinking, 'Well, that's not fair!' in a social justice aspect" (post-interview). Similarly, Tara reflected,

I can't go back now that I know what I know. I can't believe how unaware I was before. At least once a day I see something or think of something that makes me second guess a situation I see. It's crazy!!! (email communication)

These MTs began to see injustices that previously had been invisible to them because of their Whiteness.

However, as suggested by the Action Continuum, we initially saw MTs able to recognize oppression but not taking action to stop it. Often, as Wijeyesinghe et al. (1997) suggested, this inaction was due to fear or lack of information or confusion about what to do or a combination of these factors. In the second MSG session, Tara wondered,

How do you find more out about other students' cultures and their beliefs and their customs without directly asking, almost being offensive? . . . How do I find that out so I understand that perspective without it being offensive or nosy?

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Additionally, as noted earlier, we found that some of the MTs at this stage on the continuum felt it was someone else’s responsibility to address the oppression, such as their school district’s, or that they needed tools or resources from others before they could begin to confront racism and work toward social justice. For example, Sara shared, “We need resources to help us make sure that we have that equality or equity and justice within our classrooms and within our schools” (pre-interview). However, as they continued to reflect, discuss, and learn through the MSG, each MT eventually began to take ownership of her role in preventing oppression and supporting social justice. Jane shared,

It’s so eye-opening as a teacher to have like different . . . prejudices that I didn’t really think that I had that I really do. And so how can I overcome them? Like I don’t want to have those anymore. I didn’t realize I did, and then once I did, I’m like, “Oh my gosh! How do I change that?” (post-interview)

Thus, it was the combination of recognizing oppression and accepting responsibility through continued education that led to action.

Importantly, it was the education of self through participation in the MSG that led the MTs to realize lack of awareness, recognize oppression, accept responsibility, and take action. Thus, *educating self* was the basis for all three of these points on the continuum as well as the point of *educating others*. Because education was key to progressing through these four steps, it seems likely continued education would also be the basis for the last two points on the continuum, *supporting and encouraging* and *initiating and preventing*. As we elucidate in the following “Discussion” section, this need for continued education has implications for the design of professional learning opportunities that aim to promote mentoring for social justice. Furthermore, there may be additional steps that would be valuable to add to the continuum when considering professional development opportunities for mentoring for social justice, but *educating others* is as far as the participants in this study progressed in one academic year. Collectively, the findings suggest the MSG supported MT growth—as evidenced by movement on the Action Continuum toward confronting oppression—and reveal complexities of this shift as well as supporting MTs in this shift.

Discussion

We set off to explore how an MSG focused on mentoring for social justice could change the mentoring practices of White MTs, but we found that, before changes in mentoring could happen, changes within the individuals needed to occur first. In many regards, our 7-month-long MSG did address Achinstein and Athanases’s (2005) knowledge base for equity-focused mentoring. The MTs learned about the larger social contexts in which they teach and the White norms for learning that create inequities for diverse youth, particularly students of Color. They gained knowledge about their learners and the ways in which some of their students are

being marginalized, both in society and in their classrooms. The MSG seemingly provided a space for these MTs to openly and honestly discuss these issues and reflect on their own positions and prejudices. In other words, through the MSGs, the MTs gained a knowledge base that they used to examine their Whiteness and their own teaching, which seemingly was necessary before they could begin to support their STs in enacting socially just teaching. Complementing and adding to the literature, findings from this study suggest that (a) it is hard for White MTs to talk about race; (b) White MTs need to take ownership of their beliefs before they can take action to oppose oppression; and (c) before White teachers can work to change a larger system, they first need to work to change themselves.

It's Hard to Talk About Race

The MTs in this study were invited to participate because they demonstrated a commitment to continued learning as mentors. They opted in, knowing the focus of the MSG was on social justice, and entered the space with a desire to learn more. Even so, as suggested by Kaplowitz et al. (2019), Matias and Mackey (2016), and Milner (2010), the participants found talking about race difficult and avoided doing so in their pre-interviews and early MSG sessions. Though all MTs experienced diversity-related school initiatives, they initially only spoke to able-ism and language needs—to the exclusion of race and racism—when talking about equity and justice. Though both able-ism and language needs are necessary to the conversation about social justice, they alone are not sufficient. Indeed, MTs indicated that their learning about diversity in professional development did *not* have a social justice focus. Excluding race/racism from diversity initiatives is problematic. Society has trained White teachers (and White people more generally) *not* to talk about race (Sue, 2013), so teachers enter classrooms feeling unprepared to address racism (Kaplowitz et al., 2019). If unable to talk about racism, it is difficult to act out against oppression. Through the MSG, MTs began to include race and racism in conversations about diversity, equity, and social justice. Like Yoon (2012) found, our study suggests that creating spaces like MSGs is essential to normalizing race-centric conversations.

The MTs' hesitancy to talk about race also suggests, in creating such spaces, facilitators must be cognizant of factors, such as White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), that influence White MTs' learning about racism and their role in it. Thoughtful, intentional facilitation is critical in moving MTs beyond shame to action. In this study, the facilitator (Author 1) specifically focused conversations around race/racism and redirected equity-related talk that ignored race. She asked pointed questions and afforded the MTs time to reflect on those questions. She also was open about her own ignorance and her ongoing path to learning to recognize and act on oppression, making herself vulnerable in this process. This is similar to Sue's (2013) suggestions for creating an environment that allows for talk about race,

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which benefits from a facilitator who is open, truthful, and willing to share their own biases. The way Author 1 facilitated MSGs supported the MTs to persist in learning, open themselves up to new and complex ideas, and show vulnerability in front of colleagues. The MTs maintained a desire to learn throughout the year, even when what they learned made them feel uncomfortable and/or shameful. Over the course of the year, their talk *did* change; MTs began specifically addressing race, examining their Whiteness, and openly (though still with some hesitancy) engaging in dialogue about racism.

We find it important to emphasize how difficult this process was for our participants— MTs who *chose* to be part of the MSG and had wanted to learn more about social justice. Embarking on this work with educators less voluntarily invested in the process, or even resistant to these ideas, likely would present additional challenges. Thus, as Wijeyesinghe et al. (1997) suggested, it is important to understand learners’ starting points on the Action Continuum to help them progress.

Ownership First, Action to Follow

For the MTs in our study, movement along the Action Continuum toward confronting oppression required taking ownership of their own complicitness in the marginalization and oppression of others—their students of Color in particular. To take ownership, they first needed to come to the realization that they were unaware of their Whiteness and the racism occurring in society and that this lack of awareness was problematic. Because Whiteness is often invisible to those who are benefiting from the system, acknowledgment of the privileges and position of power that come with Whiteness is a necessary step toward dismantling this socially constructed system (Applebaum, 2010). As Applebaum wrote, “for white people then, it is impossible to gain an understanding of systemic racism without naming whiteness and understanding how whiteness works” (p. 9). For the MTs, once they recognized their lack of awareness of Whiteness and everyday acts of racism, they began to question the norms of society and schooling. This questioning led to self-reflection and self-education and to accepting some hard truths for these MTs. They began to see racism all around them and the roles they inadvertently were playing in maintaining racism and White supremacy.

Accepting these truths often was accompanied by feelings of shame, anger, and guilt, which, for almost all the MTs, was initially incapacitating. In this way, they centered the emotionality of Whiteness (Matias et al., 2016). The MTs had seen themselves as individuals who were whole-heartedly committed to the success of all their students. Sue (2013) explained that for many White people, talking about race can lead to a “realization that one holds biased beliefs and attitudes and has acted in discriminatory ways toward people of color[,] shatter[ing] the self-image of ‘goodness’ that many Whites hold about themselves” (p. 669). Consequently, some of the MTs initially refuted their role in oppression, citing their commitment to their

students. However, the MSG readings and discussions caused the MTs to question their actions—and inactions—with regard to their students of Color. Coming to the realization that they were complicit in the oppression of some of their students was disheartening and, in some cases, alarming. Thus, the MTs needed time to digest their lack of awareness and their complicitness and cope with the accompanying feelings. Dealing with these feelings was critical to accepting responsibility and taking action—to moving from incapacitated to empowered. Thus, the importance of *realizing lack of awareness* and *accepting responsibility*, two of the points we added to the Action Continuum, and the time these steps take to work through cannot be understated as they relate to movement toward action.

The Process Begins With Self

Although the aim of our MSG was to provide the MTs with ways to mentor their STs in equitable and socially just teaching, only some of the mentors began applying these concepts to their mentoring and, even then, only minimally. This, initially, was concerning to us, because we discussed the aforementioned topics in conjunction with three practices common to mentoring—coplanning, observing and debriefing, and analyzing student work. While the MTs were familiar with these practices and how to enact them in educative ways from their previous participation in MSGs, applying the concepts of social justice to these mentoring practices proved significantly more challenging. The Spheres of influence framework provides insight as to why this may have been the case. As Ijeyesinghe et al. (1997) contended, actions within each sphere of influence carry “a certain level of risk which may vary in light of each person’s circumstances” (p. 102). Because the oppression, equity, and social justice concepts presented in the MSG were almost entirely new to the MTs, thinking about and working with these concepts were risky for the MTs. Thus, they began to apply them in the safest sphere—the self.

Furthermore, this also likely explains why the MTs’ actions on our adapted action continuum oscillated between *realizing lack of awareness* and *recognizing oppression and accepting responsibility*. They were experiencing disequilibrium (Dewey, 1938/1997), challenging their previous assumptions and creating new meaning, through the professional learning experience (Timperley, 2011) of the MSG. The MTs were learning about the larger context in which they were living and working and examining their own positions and prejudices. These were critical steps in their own growth and required multiple discussions over time to allow for self-reflection, questioning, and sense making. As a result, the majority of time in the MSG sessions focused on these topics and the MTs themselves and less on the actual mentoring.

Building on the work of Achinstein and Athanases (2005), Gay and Kirkland (2003), and Matias and Mackey (2016), we found that White MTs need to consider their own positionalities and beliefs before being able helping novices develop into

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teachers for social justice. The MTs in our study needed time to make sense of social justice for themselves before they could begin to apply what they had learned to their teaching and mentoring.

Conclusions and Implications

Taken together, our findings reflect the importance of providing White MTs with an intentional, structured space to engage in critical conversations about social justice. Through the MSG, MTs were able to shift in their understanding of these ideas and took initial steps toward action. The MSG created time and space for MTs’ increasing awareness and movement toward action. As teacher preparation programs focus efforts on preparing teachers for an increasingly diverse landscape and also place STs in classrooms with White MTs, it seems imperative that teacher preparation programs invest time and resources into educating these MTs about social justice. As indicated by our MTs, though many school districts are addressing “diversity” through district-wide initiatives, professional development in these contexts is typically limited in scope; hence, White MTs are not likely to encounter these ideas elsewhere, or at least are not likely to be given ample time and space to explore them with the needed depth. Before White MTs are ready to incorporate these ideas into their mentoring, they need time and space to understand the ideas themselves. This suggests that teacher preparation programs must provide extended professional development opportunities to allow for self-reflection and realization and the acquisition of practices for mentoring for social justice. Unlike other spaces, the MSG provides MTs with a community to explore ideas and push each other’s thinking on challenging topics. This is essential if we want to expand White MTs’ understanding of and actions related to social justice.

If teacher preparation programs want MTs to support STs in enacting socially just teaching, then it is important for teacher preparation programs to support MTs in grappling with these complex ideas. Because of the disequilibrium White MTs experience as they question and challenge their previously held beliefs and understandings, the environment and structure of the learning are important to foster forward movement along the Action Continuum (Adams et al., 1997). We suggest following an MSG model to create space for continued mentor learning (Guenther et al., 2020; Stanulis et al., 2019). Starting with a small group of dedicated lifelong learners and then allowing these teachers to advocate for this learning among their less eager colleagues is a powerful way to build up mentors committed to social justice. If another structure is already in place, it is important to consider how topics relating to social justice can be incorporated. The use of readings, videos, TV shows, and podcasts can support discussions around social justice. (See Table 2 for suggestions.)

There is still much more to learn about professional development that supports White MTs in enacting socially just teaching *and* mentoring practices. We

continue to wonder about the structure of these MSGs themselves—what was it about this professional development model that did or did not support the MTs in shifting their thinking and actions? What aspects of the model were particularly supportive? Additionally, what are the next steps in creating a mentor PD model that supports White MTs' further movement on the continuum of action and in their spheres of influence? Our goal remains to better understand how mentoring can be used to support STs in socially just teaching practices. While we began our study with lofty goals to change the mentoring practices of MTs, we learned that much internal work needed to occur before MTs could effect change in others. MSGs can provide the sustained professional development needed for this kind of learning to occur.

Note

¹ All names are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

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Appendix:

Interview Protocols

Mentor Teacher Semistructured Pre-interview

1. Why are you interested in participating in this group?
2. How would you define or explain justice and equity?
3. What does social justice and equity mean in the context of teaching?
4. What does social justice and equity mean in the context of teacher learning?
5. What does justice-oriented teaching look like in your classroom practice?
6. What does justice-oriented teaching look like in your work with novice teachers?
7. What do you see as the role of justice-oriented teaching as novices learn to teach?
8. What do you see as the overlap between mentoring practices and justice-oriented teaching? (Probe for coplanning, observing and debriefing, analyzing student work.)
9. What do you hope to learn by participating in this group?

In addition to particular prompts, the interviewer will follow up on initial responses and ask pressing questions such as the following:

What do you mean by . . . ?

How did you do . . . ?

Tell me more about . . .

Is there anything else you’d like to add that we have yet to discuss?

Mentor Teacher Semistructured Post-interview

1. How would you define or explain justice and equity?
2. What does social justice and equity mean in the context of teaching?
3. What does social justice and equity mean in the context of teacher learning?
4. What does justice-oriented teaching look like in your classroom practice?
5. What does justice-oriented teaching look like in your work with novice teachers?

6. What do you see as the role of justice-oriented teaching as novices learn to teach?
7. What do you see as the overlap between mentoring practices and justice-oriented teaching? (Probe for coplanning, observing and debriefing, analyzing student work.)
8. What did you learn by participating in this group?
9. What do you still want to learn/explore?

In addition to particular prompts, the interviewer will follow up on initial responses and ask pressing questions such as the following:

What do you mean by . . . ?

How did you do . . . ?

Tell me more about . . .

Is there anything else you'd like to add that we have yet to discuss?