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Advancing Educators Towards Social Justice Through Policy Analysis

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Advancing Educators Towards Social Justice Through Policy Analysis

Abstract

Both pre-service and practicing educators are entering classrooms with limited preparation for the social landscape, affecting a range of professional considerations such as educational equity, culturally responsive teaching, and effective assessment. In an effort to consider greater impact and meaningful development of teachers for social justice concepts, this study is aimed directly at K-2 Kansas classrooms. A review of KSDE policies, utilizing a critical policy discourse analysis, allowed for the consideration of plausible responses for educational change regarding the advancement of educators for social justice. This research demonstrates the opportunity that exists within policy to create greater awareness for social justice issues within schools, as well as the opportunity to develop more effective educators through operationalizing language to improve educational impact.

Keywords

policy analysis; social justice education; critical pedagogy; K-12 education

Advancing Educators Towards Social Justice Through Policy Analysis

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Classroom teachers play a critical role in social justice education (SJE), as they hold firsthand accountability in directing both curriculum and instruction within their roles (Lalas, 2007). Establishing value for diversity, educational equity, as well as contrasting world views can facilitate academic achievement for all learners (Lalas & Morgan, 2006). The exploration of policy through an SJE lens of policy discerning teacher professional expectations may develop new pathways to support learners and educational practitioners.

The modern-day kindergarten through second grade (K-2) Kansas classroom may be considered an indicator of educational policy. Practitioners are navigating demanding pressures such as academic protocol and accountability guidelines (Committee on Understanding the Changing Structure of the K-12 Workforce, 2020), magnified through cultural neutrality (Peirce, 2005) and persistent hegemonic classroom values (Dover, 2009). If power and control may be legitimized and wielded by way of educational policy (Edmondson, 2004), then policy examination can provide an increased understanding for how policy operates (Bowen, 2009). The purpose of this study was to conduct a critical policy discourse analysis to examine the formal language within K-2 Kansas state educational policies that connect to professional expectations associated with professional knowledge frameworks as well as social justice concepts. First a review of the literature will be addressed, focused on a deeper understanding of educational policy and SJE within today's educational landscape. Second, the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy is discussed followed by the study's methodology and correlating research design structures. Finally, the findings and future implications will be discussed.

Reviewing the Literature

Educational policy and social justice within the kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) landscape informed the conceptual framework for this study, focusing specifically on K-2 settings. Recognizing policy as text-based procedural and regulative statements (Edmondson, 2004) within this study, a grounding in bodies of literature providing lenses for the analysis are explored next.

Educational Policy

The multifaceted framework for policy within K-12 educational structures is both complex and extensive, consisting of curricular standards, instructional resource selection protocols, as well as student performance and educational accountability measures (Committee on Understanding the Changing Structure of the K-12 Workforce, 2020). Policy was defined within this study as text-based procedural and regulative statements employing language focused on communicating an ideal (Edmondson, 2004) with expectation of impact on professional practice. Freire (2000) takes care to warn against considering policy through singular dimensions, where greater potential for oppressive programming exists. While past research has revealed policies often impede appreciation for diverse communities among diverse educational structures (Arce-Trigattie & Anderson, 2018), it is possible for educational intervention to occur through careful analysis of educational policy and documents. Cohen and Loewenberg Ball (1990) conducted a key study in educational policy providing insight for the reality of influence between educational policy and professional teaching practices. In this California-based study, practitioners' understanding over state policy changes in mathematics was examined, with findings demonstrating professional practice and educational policy hold mutually influential range with one another. Researchers determined that policies aimed at changing instructional practice are in fact also changed by those practices and by practitioners (Cohen & Loewenberg Ball, 1990). Understanding the power of mutual influence between policy, practice, and practitioner leads to the potential for research to support policy analysis that may expand considerations for educational policy research reflecting potential actions as well as restrictions concerning policy use. Applying this concern for policy use as it relates to social justice concepts, it is important to understand how the current educational landscape is impacted by modern-day realities.

Social Justice Education and the K-12 Educational Landscape

An expanding disparity exists between K-12 teacher and student demographics (Committee on Understanding the Changing Structure of the K-12 Workforce, 2020; Gay, 2018; Khalil & Brown, 2015). Within this learning environment, marginalized student groups are not performing at the same level as their peers (Shields, 2004). Shields (2004) underscores that social justice-based issues can range from achievement gaps, excessive assignment of behavior issues, as well as high dropout rates. Social justice education is naturally aligned to support student equity (Everson & Bussey, 2007). However, there is a reality of wide-ranging discrepancies with the varied understanding for SJE among not only educators, but also researchers and activists (Burns Thomas, 2007). This study acknowledges the importance of considering not only the application of SJE, but also the unique context of the K-12 practitioner in determining purposeful educational practices which support both achievement and equity with value for all (Lalas & Morgan, 2006; Lalas, 2007). This extends into awareness for areas such as social class, diversity, cultural beliefs, backgrounds, and world views (Lalas, 2007). Within this framework, SJE may be recognized as both a professional responsibility and requirement.

Considering the key role of educators in supporting SJE within K-12 classrooms, improving professional practice and purposeful educator preparation may be supported through a review of professional realities focused on developing educators. Understanding the range of knowledge systems and attitudes among practitioners may provide additional insight into acknowledging Discourse variance and instructional implications connected to SJE. Two important studies to consider are Theoharis' (2007) study with educational leaders, and Pollack's (2012) study over informal teacher-talk. Theoharis' (2007) work with school principals provides insight into teacher attitudes and beliefs obstructing progress in developing socially just school environments. Pollack's (2012) study monitored daily casual conversations of practicing teachers, finding a typified demonstration of deficit student perspectives, concluding with a need to disrupt false narratives and uncritical acceptance of stereotypes. A careful consideration for the groundwork laid by these studies may clear the pathway for understanding the imperative need of developing value for social justice among K-12 practitioners, as well as demonstrating a professional expectation of effective service. While policy continues to inform professional processes, the increasingly complex student needs within schools and classrooms indicate opportunity in understanding how policy may drive progress and educational equity through the expectation of professional action.

Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical lens for this study is critical pedagogy grounded in critical theory. Critical pedagogy, which is commonly associated with the influence of Paulo Freire (Darder et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner, et al., 2019), provides a crucial framework used for questioning systems (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019) centered on ideals such as challenge and change. Critical pedagogy offers opportunity for the transition from knowledge consumption to knowledge transformation (Giroux, 2020), enhanced through the critical practices it encompasses, such as critical reflection, critical dialogue, and critical consciousness. As each of these practices reinforce a foundation of teaching for social justice (Dover, 2009), critical pedagogy holds the power to foster meaningful reflection over professional expectations and pedagogical habits (Khan Vlach et al., 2019). Within this study, critical pedagogical concepts were used to enhance the analysis of selected educational policies through a narrowed scope of consideration for impact, observation of professional needs associated with effective implementation, as well as the acknowledgement of key connections to equitable and culturally aware educational processes.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods to support critical educators work in exploring an issue from multiple perspectives (Darder et al., 2017) where change is needed (Denzin, 2017). With critical research demonstrating an innate attunement to social justice (Crotty, 1998; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019), the study utilized critical policy analysis through discourse analysis as the methodology. Data collection for this study included careful review of policies publicly available through the Kansas State Department of Education website. Selected policies included educational documents which met the definition of policy as defined for this individual study. Due to the large scope of the study,

a focused approach was taken in reviewing K-2 components when applicable, such as policies including grade bands correlated to specified learning needs and content standards. Five coding rounds were selected, based in both Gee's (2014) and Saldana's (2016) coding tools. Each tool was selected and carefully implemented to support data analysis and interpretation within a critical discourse analysis design. A research journal was also used for the purpose of reflection and theme development and was incorporated into the final analysis.

Critical Policy Discourse Analysis

To thoroughly investigate the study's purpose, a multi-dimensional approach was taken to review various aspects of educational policy language. Utilizing educational documents as policy, supported through the defined policy parameters previously stated, the understanding of policy as a form of communication of idealized expectations (Edmondson, 2004) is at the forefront of the research. Recognizing "critical policy analysis must attend simultaneously to the working of the school and the working of society" (Prunty, 1985, p. 135), this methodology was used to consider the values embodied within policies (Prunty, 1985), as well as examine the effectiveness and potential consequences of policy (Edmondson, 2004). While policies and texts were included due to connections with SJE as well as professional expectations and applications, purposeful attention was given to research questions and the study's theoretical framework as a key critical policy analysis consideration (Taylor, 1997). Additionally, the research focused on analyzing varied content areas to support robust data collection (Bowen, 2009), as well as credibility and trustworthiness.

In conducting an effective critical policy analysis, it was key to give credence to areas such as language and meaning (Taylor, 1997). This type of research requires complicated evaluations over ideas, themes, issues (Gee, 2014) and contexts (Rogers, 2011; Taylor, 1997) within policies. This made discourse analysis an ideal match for reviewing social justice concepts. Discourse analysis served to strengthen the scope of the critical policy analysis, with analysis tools adaptable to connected theory within the research (Gee, 2014), which in this study is a critical policy framework. It was through constant reflection over the methodological and theoretical frameworks that the research design was implemented, with care to maintain a balanced approach to study components.

Research Design

This study's research design was developed through careful regard for data collection as well as the methods used with data management and analysis. The main research question was:

1. What language is used to formally address concepts of SJE within K-2 professional policies?

The research question allowed for the identification of formal language over professional expectation, specific terminology, context, content, and possible gaps. Utilizing a critical pedagogical lens, policy was selected and examined from the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) website. The content areas for analysis included educator evaluation, professional learning, and college and career readiness (CCR) standards. Examination of policy and formalized educational documents allowed for the researcher to specifically review, aim to understand, and reflect on what practitioners may require to accomplish their work when considering areas of social justice and critical learning concepts. Figure 1 notes which policies were selected for the study review.

Figure 1

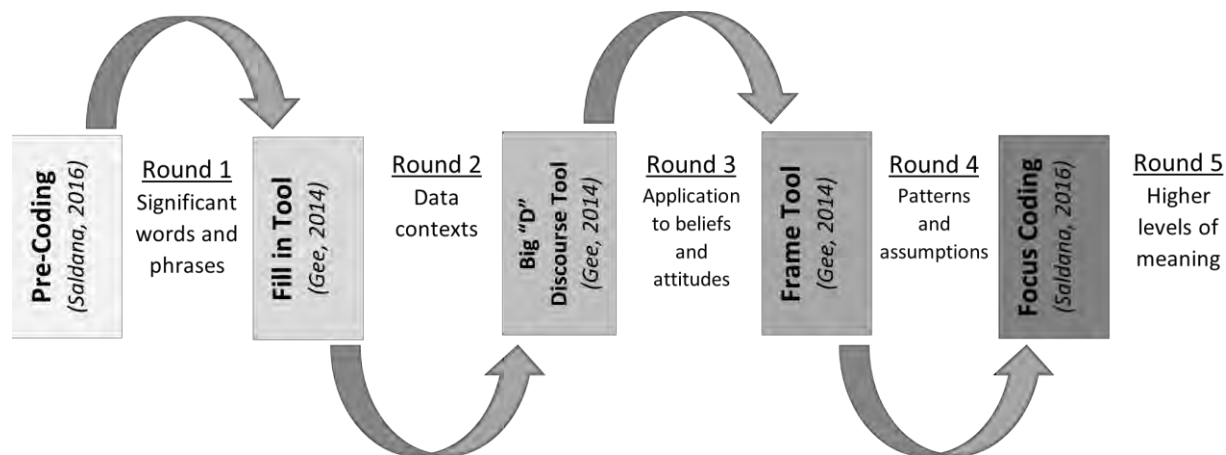
Policy Selection Matrix

Policy Selected	Data Analyzed
Kansas Professional Development Program (PDC) Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kansas Professional Education Standards • National Standards for Staff Development • Staff development rubrics and examples • Explanations over results-based staff development • Explanations over district, school, and individual professional development • Leadership and Professional Development Councils • Needs assessments • Goals of professional development • Staff development strategies • Planning and design for professional development <p><i>Omitted from analysis: Table of contents; Glossary; Appendix A: Kansas Licensure Renewal Regulations; Appendix C: Quality Performance Accreditation Regulation; Bibliography</i></p>
KEEP (Kansas Educator Evaluation Protocol)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher evaluation rubrics: Construct 1-Learner and Learning Construct 2-Content Knowledge Construct 3-Instructional Practice Construct 4-Professional Responsibility
K-12 English Language Arts Standards (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of document • Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade Standards and all associated components (progression of standards, options for practice, related long-term learning goals) <p><i>Omitted from analysis: Standards for grades 3-12</i></p>
Math Standards (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of document and Standards development • Rose Capacities and Kansas Social, Emotional, and Character Development Model Standards • Mathematics learning progressions and teaching practices • Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade Standards <p><i>Omitted from analysis: Standards for grades 3-8 and 'High School' Standards; Student and Teacher Glossaries; Tables; Sample of Words Consulted</i></p>
Kansas History Government and Social Studies (HGSS) Standards (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of document and special acknowledgements • Mission Statement • Standards and Benchmarks • Effective HGSS Classroom Practices • Suggested scope and sequence • Instructional steps for higher learning • Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade Standards and all associated components (Focus Standards, course descriptions, past/future learning, culturally relevant pedagogy, suggestions for content and instruction, academic and personal competencies, resources, integration, and more) • Glossary of terms <p><i>Omitted from analysis: Standards for grades 3-5th, Middle School, and High School</i></p>
Kansans Can Civic Engagement Fact Sheet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background statements over Kansans Can Civic Engagement development • Mission Statement for HGSS Standards • Definitions for Civic Engagement terms • 'Schools Can' instructional practices • Statements on building self-efficacy
10 Mostly Instructional Practices to Improve Civic Engagement in Any Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy content including instructional practices and explanatory statements <p><i>Omitted from analysis: active links to additional webpages as additive 'Resources'</i></p>

This study implemented an extensive coding process, aimed at optimizing the researcher's objective of questioning the data in both meaningful and specific ways (Gee, 2014). Five separate coding tools and techniques were used, with each selected based in vital, differing approaches for reviewing the data. The tools, as noted in Figure 2, were organized to optimize researcher insights and focused analysis. Round one utilized Saldana's (2016) Pre-Coding structure, followed by Gee's (2014) Fill in tool, Big "D" Discourse tool, and the Frame Tool, finally ending with Focus Coding (Saldana, 2016). The study was initiated with Saldana's (2016) pre-coding exercise. During this phase, significant words and phrases were marked (Saldana, 2016), and those findings were then used to organize the proceeding tools. This first thorough review of policies resulted in a list of codes which were based in SJE concepts, professional learning, and critical social elements. The following tools would provide more focused analysis aimed at expanding insights. Round two's Fill in Tool considered what information may need clarification based on differing knowledge systems, with care to examine data contexts. Round three's Big "D" Discourse Tool was used to analyze areas of language connected to research themes such as SJE and professional needs, in correlation to beliefs and attitudes connected to varying Discourse lenses. This step was followed by Round four's Frame Tool, centered on the examination of policy patterns and assumptions, determining additional areas in need of exploration to answer any questions or confirm researcher understanding. Coding rounds concluded with Round five's focused coding. This final step was an extensive analysis of all previous data collection and coding, with the goal of determining higher levels of meaning associated with data themes and the study's research questions.

Figure 2

Coding Rounds and Descriptions



Results: Language Addressing Social Justice Education

The study focused on utilizing a critical discourse lens while maintaining a multi-dimensional analysis of the selected policies. Findings included a thorough review of language, as well as consideration for the researcher's codes, and code frequency. Coding trends allowed for discovery of patterns and the analysis of major themes. Table 1 demonstrates the categorical coding sort

which was determined at the conclusion of the final round of analysis. When applying higher levels of meaning within the analysis of coding and policies, study findings were organized in response to the research question, with the intention of analyzing language used to address SJE. The correlating study findings include language communicating culturally responsive teaching practices; coded language to indicate support for all learners; and language communicating an appearance of values through social justice language and concepts.

Table 1

Round Five Categorical Coding Sort

Coding Round 5: Focused Coding (Saldana, 2016) <i>Intention: Higher Levels of Meaning in analysis of coding and policies</i>		
Research Question 1	Connecting Codes to Priority Research Concepts	Correlating Study Findings
Analyzing Language Used to Address SJE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourse Lens-Kansans • Umbrella Phrasing to Cover Effective Classroom Structures • Umbrella Phrasing to Cover All Learners • SJE Language • Culturally Responsive Teaching • SJE-Potential Opportunity • SJE-Learner Accommodations • SJE-Explicit Opportunity • SJE-Diversity & Culture • SJE-Diverse Learners • Clarity Needed-Culturally Responsive Teaching as an Expected Component • Assumption-Taught with SJE Application • Clarity Needed-SJE Supported within This Learning • Knowledge Needed for Effective SJE Application • Context-Kansas' Students Long Term Success • Context-Student Learning • Student Learning Expectations • Ability and Diversity • Social Activism 	<p><i>Language communicating culturally responsive teaching practices</i></p> <p><i>Coded language to indicate support for all learners</i></p> <p><i>Language communicating an appearance of values through social justice language and concepts</i></p>

Culturally Responsive Teaching

When viewing language communicating culturally responsive teaching, examples could be found in the following areas: practitioners should exhibit social awareness in connection to learning; creating classroom environments which reflect value for individual identities; responsive instructional practices which include effective assessment. The reviewed document with the most focused expectation of this professional practice was the History, Government, Social Studies (HGSS) Standards, associating the concepts of effective practice with cultural awareness. Although the presence of shared professional expectations connected with culturally responsive teaching were present among additional policies, they did not hold the same benefit of explicit and clear language. In many instances, complicated instructional descriptions as well as generic and coded phrasing led to wide-ranging understanding for expected professional roles and procedures. This could be demonstrated through National Staff Development Council Standards including expectations over professional learning focused on equity measures, as well as having a rubric which includes acknowledging students' diverse backgrounds. While these areas each encompass

culturally responsive work, the limitation of consistent language and clear direction may prevent practitioners from recognizing the patterned actions as culturally responsive practice.

Coded Language to Indicate Support for All Learners

Building on the connection of policy language which demonstrates effective practice, the need for practitioners to support and develop all learners was observed throughout the included policies. However, the policy language was limited and ambiguous. This notes the secondary finding, in which generic and potentially coded language is used to indicate support for all learners. Also connected to culturally responsive work, this indicates an overarching objective of maintaining high level expectations for all students. Codes relating to this concept included ‘SJE-diverse learners’, ‘learner accommodations’, ‘umbrella phrasing to cover all learners’, and ‘context based in student learning.’ It is worth noting that each of the reviewed policies observed support and aims of success for all learners. However, few policies extended that sentiment and expectation beyond the limited description of ‘diverse learners’ or ‘all learners.’ At times attempts appear to be made in describing diverse learners, although limited to description of English language learners or students with specialized needs. The Professional Development Program Guidelines demonstrated value for disaggregating student data, but there appeared limited follow-up on meaningful incorporation of the data within professional learning that moved beyond monitoring student learning. As diversity clearly exists within Kansas classrooms, greater care in language development over both the identification of diverse learner range and inherent instructional realities may serve practitioners in developing their awareness within instructional processes.

Language Communicating an Appearance of Values Through Social Justice Language and Concepts

In continuing a close review of policy language for this study, findings support the appearance of values connected to SJE concepts. However, these concepts are also offered with enough ambiguity to allow for confusion over the depth of both expectation and potential impact. Areas of explicit language, though limited, include terms such as culturally relevant teaching, equity, and culture. It became apparent that practitioners with fluctuating knowledge and comfort levels of social justice concepts could hold varying levels of awareness for opportunities for SJE based in generic language and Discourse considerations. With the realistic potential of Discourse influencing understanding, another exploration of policy analysis moves into striving to understand policy intention and assumptions that may be present over policy readers. To this point, the English Language Arts (ELA) Standards note the intention of understanding diverse perspectives as a foundational exercise. This alone may indicate a wide-range of professional understandings and applications, from the simple integration of class discussions and opinion-based research to the more developed knowledge base of implementing opportunities for critical dialogue, review of critical social issues, and awareness for differing cultural beliefs and backgrounds. In another example, the KEEP policy observes an expectation of rigor and the presence of high expectations for every learner, however it does not connect this to culturally responsive actions. In isolation, this

appears grounded in supporting effective instruction. However, when considering varying Discourses among educators, this could mean the difference between a practitioner limiting their actions to documented learning needs, or those understanding this could be expanded into issues of identity ranging from culture, ability, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. The findings clearly demonstrate practitioners with a Discourse context of SJE as well as culturally responsive teaching would see opportunities and actions where those without that framework would observe a different range of professional expectations. There exists within this world of generic language numerous opportunities for the development of cultural competencies and critical pedagogical processes in an objectively effective professional framework.

Discussion and Implications

If educational policy manifests itself through classroom structures, procedures, and professional expectations (Prunty, 1985), then we may see that the power of policy should be considered paramount within educational initiatives. Language within policy is not objective, as it is constantly building and rebuilding institutions (Sam, 2019). Considering policy communicates ideals (Edmondson, 2004), recognition of policies discursive traits allows for greater care in reviewing the connection between values and ideologies and social contexts (Sam, 2019). If policy is to be developed for greater effectiveness and meaning for professionals as well as greater impact and alignment to SJE, policy language may be key. Areas for review include transitioning generic language to incorporate greater inclusivity and specific terms and phrasing, specific considerations over assumptions of policy readers, building towards greater awareness and enhanced development of policy consumption, as well as a recommendation for greater engagement between KSDE and Kansas practitioners.

Policy: Recognizing Ambiguity and Assumptions

When we pause to ask how language is being perceived, effective development of policy language may begin to take place. If educational policies utilize generic language such as ‘diverse learners’ or ‘all learners’ as default demonstrations of varying student needs, potential for coded communication occurs. If we take into account the definition of coded language as “terms describing racial identity with seemingly race-neutral terms that disguise explicit and/or implicit racial animus” (National Education Association, 2017, p. 25), the findings suggest that although generic language is not intentionally misleading, it may actually bolster potential for deficit thinking. Lack of explicit language may also result in the prevention of accurate practitioner understanding, leading to limitations in effective practice. The act of creating inclusive and specific terminology and phrasing recognizes both practitioner experiences and awareness for the students they serve.

In continuing to recognize opportunity to disrupt policy ambiguity and assumptions, differing professional understandings and awareness realities concerning social justice opportunities may be

considered a major language gap to be addressed. Discrepancies between SJE options verses expectations leads to confusion over professional actions and protocol, resulting in practitioners resolving instructional uncertainties. Utilizing the Discourse tool for analysis revealed the constant need to examine understanding for policy intent, assumption over policy users, as well as professional Discourse lenses. Policy may be polarizing (Sam, 2019) when conflicting Discourse is at play, making way for policy narratives which may disrupt progress and impact. A study in Florida (Harrison, 2017) found policy narratives served as a manipulation of policy language to support varying agendas and frameworks. Working from a limited perspective is in opposition to Freire's (2000) warning against use of a singular lens to avoid oppressive actions. Perhaps through a combination of practitioners engaging in policy development (Edmondson, 2004) and policy makers demonstrating understanding and awareness of policy language and intent, the elimination over assumptions and varied interpretation may begin to lead to greater understanding for effective action and professional protocol.

Policy: KSDE and Kansas Schools Moving Forward

Policy work may be considered a long-term investment. As such, KSDE and Kansas schools can begin this journey through investing in purposeful active engagement with one another. Specifically, KSDE can explore opportunities to intentionally work closely with practitioners for a more direct view of Kansas classrooms. The collaboration would imply increased communication over policy development and educational impact with educational professionals connected to classroom contexts and applied processes. Classroom practitioners have a pulse on the lived experiences of both Kansas teachers and students, offering key insights and valuable first-hand knowledge. Active engagement with practitioners could occur in a variety of ways, including dialogue sessions, surveys, regional meetings, and more. Areas of focus within this framework could include deeper understanding of policy terms and intent, as well as a greater expansion of policy structure to ensure comprehensive consideration for needs within classrooms and schools, such as the wide-ranging social demographics, socio-economic status, and academic realities present throughout the span of the state. If Cohen and Loewenberg Ball's (1990) work is again considered, recognition that educational policy and professional practice are mutually influential may serve as both an opportunity as well as a call to action in establishing active communication between policy makers at the state level, and the public servants who enact those policies.

Limitations

This study allows for opportunities to discern professional expectations and associated needs connected to SJE within K-2 learning, based on careful review of policy. The researcher acknowledges key areas of limitations within this study, which would benefit from further exploration in future research. First and foremost, this study is limited to the scope of a K-2 focus. This limitation was based in an effort to support effective data collection and the extensive review of included policy. Consideration and incorporation of the larger K-12 system and overarching policy review would be of great value within future research frameworks. Additionally, the

researcher acknowledges there would be great benefit and importance in future policy analysis to include the exploration of social, cultural, and historical dates and happenings associated with policy creation and policy change. Recognizing the importance of correlating events (Gee, 2014, Prunty, 1985) may serve to add understanding and meaning to policy influences and impact.

Conclusion

Resolving the continued conflict over education and the role of SJE can be supported through qualitative studies such as this, where review of potential professional needs may improve educational practice regarding SJE within our classrooms. It is a critical practice for educators to engage with policy (Edmondson, 2004), as well as educational leaders (Radd & Grosland, 2018). While educational policy can be a complicated matrix (Floden et al., 2020), this study's findings are indicative of the need to engage in a larger discussion over policy, professional needs, and SJE concepts as these areas align with educational processes. This study analyzed educational policies through critical policy discourse analysis, designed to address the formal language used regarding over SJE and associated professional needs. While the findings indicated generic language and policy-assumptions, there was also a demonstration of acknowledgment of social justice concepts. Through continued review of policy language, opportunity to develop educational modalities for effective instruction responsive to socially just practice is possible through language development and greater consciousness within policy creation.

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