A Pedagogy of Care: Practices of Social Justice Advocates During COVID 19

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Abstract

Throughout education history, inequities have evolved in our public schools. History has attested to numerous injustices, such as segregation, unequal funding, undifferentiated teaching of English learners, within our school systems. The rise of a pandemic revealed how layered and problematic these injustices were entrenched in our public school system. The purpose of this study explored how social justice orientations influenced the teaching practices of educators in Texas school districts during COVID 19. Utilizing an inductive approach, this qualitative study centered on the accounts and experiences of 25 elementary and secondary teachers from three different Title I school districts in southwest Texas. Findings from this study revealed how the participants' leadership preparation helped them address equity issues with bilingual students, serve students with special needs, and build relationships in the middle of a pandemic.

Keywords: *pedagogy, reflections, ethic of care, social justice, Latino, critical practice*

Inequities in urban public schools have occurred throughout the history of education. The historic marginalization of underprivileged students and the perpetuation of the status quo have served to benefit the same students and families for hundreds of years while simultaneously ignoring the needs of low income, Black, Brown, Native, and Asian students and their families (Apple, 1993; Brown, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Larson & Ovando, 2001). Injustices and inequity in the school system, urban public schools especially, have ranged from segregation (Kozol, 2012), to funding inequities (NCES, 2012), and even to unequal education opportunities (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

Marshall and Oliva (2010) remind us:

> Although we have come a long way from the ingenuous and naive blindness to racism and inequity…there is still a lot to accomplish for the achievement of real social justice with regards to racism, sexism, homophobia, and other such issues. (p. 3)

These issues of injustice continue to be a struggle for us all as we strive to educate ourselves and fight for social justice and equity. According to Kozol (2012), "Many people seemed to view the [segregation] issue as 'a past injustice' that had been sufficiently addressed. Others took it as an unresolved injustice that no longer held sufficient national attention to be worth contesting" (p. 212). The conditions of schools are directly related to the demographics surrounding them. Minor-

itized communities are consistently underserved in education and such students within these systems often receive a subpar education compared to their non-minority counterparts (Dixson and Anderson, 2018; Nieto, 2006).

Society often does not view children, specifically minority children, as a social investment (Valenzuela, 1999). These students fall into a predetermined pathway designed for school failure and school inequality. They are left behind without hope, without vision, and without equal access to the excellent education to which all children are entitled (Brown, 2006). To create equity within education, we must change the way society views underprivileged children and prepare educators to serve children adequately and equitably.

Considering the continued failure of school improvement efforts (Lester, 2018; Sarason, 2004) and the "inadequate to appalling" quality of university leadership preparation programs (Levine, 2005), leadership for social justice has never been of greater importance. For example, with a large emphasis on state-mandated testing, accountability has relegated learning into a kind of quantification (Falabella, 2020). With the push for academic performance and "obsession with testing" (Waite et al., 2001), many students do not advance to higher education, especially speakers of a language other than English.

Grogan (2005) suggests that faculty of University Council of Educational Administration member institutions can assist in creating a "tipping point" in the field by observing five considerations: what one chooses to teach, how one decides to teach it, what one decides to inquire into, who one is and how one deals with others, and how one chooses to make a difference. Theoharis (2007) also suggests that for current leaders and faculty of preparation programs to understand the challenges, rewards, and the moral and ethical imperative of leading for social justice, it is essential for leaders first to develop a theory of social justice educational leadership. However, just as there is no single approach to developing leaders for social justice, there is no single definition to operationalize this complex idea. As such, scholars advance multiple and varied definitions to better understand the notion of social justice.

Brown (2006) and Evans (2007) similarly assert that social justice leaders are concerned with equity issues. Dantley & Tillman (2010) agree that social justice leaders focus on equity; however, they argue that social justice leaders also understand how institutional norms create and sustain inequities and are willing to address those systemic practices. McKenzie et al. (2008) also believe social justice leaders focus on equity issues and work at the systems level, and provide a specific direction. McKenzie et al. insist that leaders for social justice must focus on raising academic achievement for all students, prepare students to be critical citizens, and create inclusive classrooms and schools. As a result, many school leaders are guided by the technical component of the profession. In contrast, others only go so far as implementing equity-related policies rather than demanding better than the letter of the law (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). According to Kemp-Grahman (2015), leadership preparation programs in the state should include critical theories and their paradigmatic implications on how to meet the needs of the 21st-century learner.

Much of the current curriculum focusing on social justice addresses the theories and case studies highlighted by authors in multicultural education, school reform, and educational leadership. However, few masters (M.Ed.) programs call on their participants to enact change in their current work environment. If current and future educational leaders are expected to foster successful, equitable, and socially responsible learning and accountability practices for all students, then substantive changes in educational leadership preparation and professional development programs are required (Brown, 2006).

Background Information

The Urban School Leaders Collaborative (USLC) is a master's program at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) that prepares educators to become social justice leaders in educational administration. This preparation program is designed to advance interactive collaboration between students, higher education faculty, and school district administrators to develop critical and equitable school leaders (Cordova, Garza & Niño, 2019; Garza & Merchant, 2009; Merchant & Garza, 2015; Merchant, Garza, Niño, Vielma, & Saucedo, 2020). The USLC is a 36- semester credit hour program that leads to a Master of Education degree in Educational Leadership and principal certification. The program began its partnership with one school district in 2003 to address the needs of developing leaders who could understand the complexities of working in urban school districts (Merchant & Garza, 2015). This leadership preparation program has grown its partnership between UTSA and multiple school districts in Bexar County, Texas. The USLC is a cohort-based leadership preparation program dedicated to developing leadership capacity and supporting and retaining emerging leaders.

The purpose of the USLC highlights a "different" model of leadership preparation designed and customized to prepare school leaders to practice in schools where the student population is predominantly Latino. In 2013, the Urban School Leaders Collaborative won the first UCEA Annual Exemplary Educational Leadership Program Award. This recognition gave the USLC program visibility as an exemplary preparation program. The program focuses on developing transformational leaders who have a robust commitment to children in the community and improving education for disadvantaged populations (Merchant & Garza, 2015).

Social Justice Preparation Program

The Urban School Leaders Collaborative (USLC) has developed a comprehensive curriculum focusing on social justice in current educational systems. A philosophy of social justice advocacy drives the Urban School Leaders Collaborative. Garza (2004) reminds us that "social justice is an attitude" (p. 579).
The focus of preparation is initially on attitudes and mindsets and then on skills needed for effective administrative practices for the principalship. USLC students use critical literature, class discussions, and personal transformation to develop strategies to increase social justice practices in their current educational positions while developing leadership skills to create change in educational systems (Garza, 2020). USLC students recognize the value of a strong-willed person who does not compromise his/her non-negotiables to fight the injustices that so many minority children face within the public school system (Theoharis, 2009; Marshall & Oliva, 2010). The USLC students' first-hand experiences provided an up-close and personal perspective on the characteristics a leader in a social justice program exemplifies and the changes that can occur when social justice is implemented (Theoharis, 2009).

The main goal of this leadership program includes equity, access, social justice, democracy, risk taking, and responsiveness to community needs as a means to practice in schools. Merchant and Garza (2015) have conceptualized this transformational program the USLC as a process that will facilitate the development of leaders for social justice who are:

- Willing to engage in deep reflection for the purpose of self-discovery and to establish a strong sense of self, who they are, and what they stand for

- committed and competent to work in diverse and increasingly complex cultural contexts
- committed to aggressive reform and improvement disenfranchised students
- skilled in the management of innovation and change
- committed to understanding organizational cultures, how they operate, and how to create dynamic learning and working environments (p. 43-44).

COVID as Space for Study

Increasing complexity to educational change occurred when the United States became a forced participant in the COVID-19 pandemic. In the spring of 2020, our educational system was attacked by a factor in which no one within the educational system could have predicted. The pandemic hit the United States in a way that no country in the world was prepared for. COVID-19 forced the United States to go into a social "lockdown" to prevent the spread of this virus. The virus had deadly physical consequences and made "normal" activities such as work and school challenging to be active participants. The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators and families to pivot into a new instructional model. From the onset of statewide lockdown, most schools transitioned to online instruction, while other schools provided alternative means for remote learning, or they closed entirely. With the developments of the pandemic, schools continue to adjust their mode of instruction. As a result of the lockdown, eventually all Texas schools adopted online instruction. Before COVID-19, all school systems had prioritized face-to-face instruction and interactive multi-sensory learning environments. Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that young children learn through the exploration of objects (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Edwards, 2005; Fleer, 2011). To further compound the situation, the educational inequities that existed between low and high socioeconomic status (SES) schools in the past were now glaringly more apparent. Schools with minimal resources prior to COVID-19 struggled to bridge the technological divide between what the state required for remote learning and the resources available to them (TEA, 2020). As a challenge for families, the technological infrastructure in homes was either missing or outdated and incapable of supporting the digital learning platforms necessary for virtual instruction.

Using COVID-19 as a learning opportunity and possible space for study, this investigation is timely to better understand how educators adjust and adapt to drastic overnight changes in education. As professionals, not much preparation was provided to educators as they transitioned from a traditional method of instruction to a new generational approach to learning. Taking into consideration the changes that have occurred in our lives leads to this study. Therefore, this study aims to get a deeper understanding of the perspective and shared lived experiences of the students within the USLC program.

Design of Study

This qualitative study centers on the testimonials and experiences of 25 elementary and secondary educators from different Title I school districts in southwest Texas. Refer to table 1 for district profiles.The participants were graduate students in the Urban School Leaders Collaborative. Critical to this study is the evolving paradigm of critical consciousness (Freire, 1993) and social justice (Marshall & Oliva, 2006) as the lens to gather and analyze the data. The strategies used to collect data for this study include semi-structured zoom *pláticas*, class discussions, and

critical reflections (Patton, 2015; Wolcott, 1994). In order to crystallize the data (Ellingson, 2009), artifacts from autoethnographies and reflective journals were gathered and analyzed.

The focus of this study centers on the practices and experiences of USLC students during COVID-19. However, it is essential to describe the context. All participants work in Title I districts in the county. Title I is a federally funded program for school districts designed to improve disadvantaged students' academic achievement. Title I provides all children significant opportunities to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and close educational achievement gaps (ESEA, 2015). A student is economically disadvantaged when the student is eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program (TEA, 2020).

For this study, "at-risk" describes students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school. In most cases, "risk factors" are situational rather than innate. Circumstances that could jeopardize at-risk students' ability to complete school include homelessness, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, serious health issues, domestic violence, and transiency. Other considerations may consist of low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retention, or other learning-related factors that could adversely affect students' educational performance and attainment (TEA, 2020).

Districts: Eastern ISD has a population of 10,166 students. According to the Texas Education Agency (2020), 76% of the students are at-risk. Almost all students in the district, 94.7%, are labeled as economically disadvantaged. The community serves a majority Latino/a/x student population of 97.2%, with 1.4% identifying as African American students, 0.6% as White, and 0.6% as Asian.

Holiday ISD has 14,000 students, with 75% of the population being labeled as at-risk (Texas Education Agency, 2020). In HISD, 88% of students are economically disadvantaged. The district serves a majority of Latino/a/x population of 97.8%, 0.4% African American and 1.5% White students. A small 0.1% of students identify with two or more races.

Sunnyvale ISD serves 13,733 students with almost 70% of the population identified as at-risk according to the Texas Education Agency (2020). Eighty-five percent of students are labeled as economically disadvantaged. Similar to the other two districts, SISD serves a majority of Latino/a/x population of 90.4%, 3.5% African American and 5.5% White students.

Table 1
District Profiles

	Eastern ISD	Holiday ISD	Sunnyvale ISD
Student population	10,166	14,000	13,733
At-risk	76 %	75 %	70 %
Economically Disadvantaged	94.7 %	88 %	85 %

Latino/a/x	97.2 %	97.8 %	90.4 %
African American	1.4 %	0.4 %	3.5 %
White	0.6 %	1.5 %	5.5 %
Asian	0.6 %	0.1 %	-

The following perspectives highlight how the social justice mindset influenced the educators' lives and how educators respond and shape their practice in the midst of the pandemic. This study was grounded following Anzaldúa's (1990) words, "by bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space" (p. xxv) to better understand how a social justice preparation influenced the pedagogy of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Report of the Data

Through qualitative research design and analysis of the data collected, the participants of this study shared their experiences about the social justice preparation and the context in which they found themselves working with students. These common elements among all participants emerge as the primary themes, including reflective advocate, relationships, bilingual Advocate, and special needs advocate.

Reflective Advocate

Reflection was a critical component in each participant's program development; however, participants shared how the practice of reflection became an instrumental part of their everyday lives during COVID.

Tina shared in her journal about all the types of reflections which occurred duringthe program. She mentioned self-reflections, one-word reflections, reflections about her experiences, reflections on material that she read, viewed and studied, and reflection on speakers she heard that were critical in helping her better understand education during the pandemic.

For Gary, he shared,

> I have learned to appreciate the powerful therapy of reflection. It does bring you into another mental state and in better decision making. It was an eye-opening experience to read the article and see what the Ph.D. students were taught, and reflect on many of the same items we learned during our journey in the USLC. This mindset helped me better understand COVID and its ever-changing impact on education and our lives.

In a similar vein, Rachel shared how reflection has influenced her practice as an educator:

Through my reflection, I've learned that we need to remember to be compassion[ate] to our parents and students because we don't know their stories nor the struggles they're going through. This week, I asked my students how they felt about COVID, and most of them said, "worried, sad and nervous." Each of them clearly explained their worries and fears about our current situation. How many adults share how we are feeling aloud to others?

David observed how the program impacted him:

This program helps you learn how to become a better person. It breaks you down emotionally and intellectually, and then it builds you back up. USLC teaches you how and when to push, and it teaches you to be patient so you don't give up.

Whether reflection is applied within the professional or personal life, participants shared how it manifested and impacted them during challenging moments.
Rita stated,

The process was complex because our lives are so intertwined with others. Therefore, just focusing on ourselves was quite difficult for me. Separating my personal and professional life was also difficult because they are also at times the same. What made me who I am? What do I stand for? What are my beliefs and non-negotiables?

Reflection allowed participants to think about what worked well and what went wrong with situations at their schools. Most importantly, it gave them an opportunity to go back and change some of those mishaps. As Cathy shared, "being able to reflect is a powerful thing to do. I find when [you] can do some form of reflection, you can also have the power to turn around and take action."
For John, reflection was critical given the difficult moments everyone was facing with COVID. He shared,

For me, the USLC program has been therapeutic, as my journey of self-discovery has forced me to confront events from my past. To complete this program as a cohort has been a unique experience. I have created friendships and, in many ways, a second family. A question was asked on the first day of class, and I now have an answer. But the journey is not over. The next journey is just beginning in the middle of chaos.

Participants shared that reflection became a vessel to form relationships with others. Given the context where they work, participants shared how they were able to connect with others.

Relationships

Another common theme amongst the participants was relationships and the authenticity of those relationships and their influence. Participants developed relationships with different people, such as with other cohort members, their students, and the support and relationships with their families. Sam mentioned the support throughout the cohort when he stated, "Thanks to my personal strength and the support of my wife, family, friends, co-workers, classmates, and professors, I am still here and almost at the finishing line. I believe this has strengthen[ed] me and will be

helpful as I embark on my career as an administrator and all the challenges that entail" Emily mentioned the support of her family as well. She noted how the relationships we have with our families help to create who we become in the future. She wrote:

> My family are the most important people in my life because they have taught me the principles and values I needed to know to be a successful individual without forgetting who I am and where I came from. With this being said, all the knowledge and principles I have obtained from my family has reflected on what I am currently doing with my students. I do my best to provide them with a caring environment where they feel safe to be themselves so they can thrive into successful individuals themselves.

Other participants also mentioned similar experiences. Several USLC students gave examples of the relationships built within the group and how those relationships will continue to support them in their future endeavors. Laura mentioned,

> I have also gained some close relationships with other educators within my district and districts within my area. My professional network has expanded exponentially, and I can use these relationships for the rest of my professional career. We, as a cohort, have grown together, struggled, and had doubts. Also, we have been there to support each other. We, as educators, have transformed into a group of closely-knit social justice leaders. I will always have someone to call on or rely on to assist me if needed.

Another relationship brought up by several participants was the relationships established with their students. Many participants found that creating authentic relationships with the children they teach makes a much more substantial impact on the students than merely educating them. The USLC experience assisted the participants in building and sustaining relationships with students. Monica mentioned the following, "I found that building authentic relationships with the students is a crucial component in the educational setting. When you show the students that you care for them, their attitudes towards schooling are more positive. The relationships with our students, family members, and each other have played a vital role in molding and developing us as future social justice leaders."

Bilingual Advocate

Participants in this study serve a large bilingual population. With the transition of online education, participants found that bilingual students in low SES communities were facing a new challenge, namely a change with instructional modalities and utilization of resources. However, some participants shared how they used their positionality to create a pedagogy to serve bilingual students.

Marcy reflected that she has learned in the pandemic to prepare herself better to serve her bilingual students properly.

> My delivery instruction has changed because planning my lessons for 22 little ones who are bilingual has to have more kinesthetic instruction. Lessons are shorter, so they do not lose interest quickly. I took a course for blended learning instruction during the summer, and it has helped me allow students to have choices in what they wish to work on first. This

training has been helpful when my face-to-face students are working independently (asynchronous).

Rob has adapted his teaching to better serve the students he serves and continues to evolve his pedagogy. He shares,

I feel that my pedagogy has evolved immensely since the start of school closures during COVID-19. Although teachers were just trying to survive and continue the school year, we have learned how to adapt to the new reality of online school. I'd be lying if I said that I'm a genius at this virtual learning/teaching. I most certainly am not. As the spring semester rolled on, I found myself still struggling in late April. What I found helpful for our special populations, including bilingual students, was translating text from English to Spanish. The program I use allows me to hover over a word to see a picture of the word, and has the capability of having the text be read to you and dictate your sentences.

In a similar mindset, Hilary also acknowledges the shift from previous years to teaching in COVID times. For her, teaching has been challenging. "This whole new way of delivering instruction has not been easy to say the least. However, I am working to adjust my lessons as needed so my students can be successful in their native language."

Vickie shared how she incorporates techniques that her district or campus does not approve of, but she feels she has to provide additional support for her bilingual students. She shared,

I will straight up admit that I have been using google translate to help my ESL students understand what to do. I also am allowing them to submit work in Spanish, and I am even translating assignments for them. I know that this is against our model, but I feel that I need to help them in any way I can.

Onis fully understands the challenges of not speaking the English language as a student in US schools; however, he uses his lived experiences to assist them. He shared,

I just had to think outside the box. I had to develop activities specifically for my bilingual kids that can be done at home and shift my grading to a "pass" and "excellent" model. Students with minimum to no work get a 70 from me, and those who attempted the work get an automatic hundred regardless. My intention is to do no harm during this pandemic.

Renata, an experienced educator, acknowledges the challenges COVID creates for bilingual students. However, she also uses her positionality to adapt to meaningful practices that respond to the student's current needs. Structuring lessons to facilitate student engagement situate them as active participants in the learning environment. She shared,

During our daily 15 minutes English Language Development block, I create purposeful and strategic lessons to support student learning. During those 15 minutes, we establish a dialogue routine where students answer to the prompt of the day. I continue promoting a sociocultural understanding what students can engage in learning with their peers. I admire

their conversations because they're full of knowledge and are ready to share what they know to others.

Similarly, Claudia, also shared her strategies for creating a more meaningful classroom for bilingual students. Claudia takes a more personal approach to attract students' attention.

I personally share my heritage with my students and connect with them when I develop my lessons. I try to understand how my students and parents feel when they are connected to learn in the new environmental situation. The COVID-19 virus has brought new ways and modalities for teachers to use and implement in their classrooms.

Embracing a similar personal approach in her classroom, Graciela also adopts a practice that her district does not recommend for teachers. However, knowing her students, she welcomes the learning process using all approaches.

I like to make connections with my students' lives and ask them to share their personal experiences, and I am OK with them speaking in Spanish or verbalizing their responses. This is something I was told not to do in the past, but because of that, many of my students shut down last year. This year, I will give them a fighting chance and encourage their growth by building relationships first.

In a similar vein, Mariela shared how her pedagogy is centered on a personal approach to engage in the learning process with her students. She stated,

Much more of my pedagogy involves conversation and reflection rather than just lecturing and monitoring. This seems to be supporting both special populations in my class. In other areas of the campus, it is difficult to tell how learners are being assisted.

Sonia, acknowledged the importance of welcoming the student in her classroom, but also values the contribution families have on students' success. She shared how she tries to work with students and even arranges the live virtual sessions to fit the parent's schedule. She shared her approach,

The most important thing is opportunities for interactions with peers and live interactions with teacher. This means trying to make yourself available for more synchronous interactions throughout the day. I work with families, share my schedules, and also try to be flexible, even if that means after hours.

For Sulema, her focus as an educator shifted with COVID. Her stance evolves from the instructional role to the social role. For her, being an educator also requires attention to the affective domain of students.

In addition to flexibility, teachers are also having to work as social skills liaisons, to make sure that they are not only providing opportunities for live-interactions but putting extra emphasis on socio-emotional learners to ensure that students feel safe in virtual environments.

Sonia, also shared the same perspective in providing emotional support to her bilingual students.

> With the rapid change due to COVID, I have not only focused on academics, but also focused on the socioemotional end. With a new administration at our school, I have ensured that our administration is aware of the lack of focus being placed on the bilingual students and their families. I have been an advocate and shared how our current EL Liaison can no longer handle her work at the slow pace she always has.

The participants' testimonios attest to a necessity that each one encountered within the virtual bilingual learning environment. Participants made instructional adjustments to serve the best interests of the English language learner. Adapting their planning, delivery, and use of resources, participants shifted instructional modalities, affirmed student linguistic assets, improved rapport with parents, and nurtured student interactions. Using their positionality as advocates for bilingual students meant some decisions fell outside district guidelines and policy. Participants considered their students' socioemotional needs to advance their learning and attend to the whole person in education.

Special Needs Advocate

Participants also expressed the need to deliver high quality experiences for students' varied learning needs. Most participants believe that the virtual world is making it tougher to make accommodations during whole group synchronous times. Some participants shared why the asynchronous and small group time became even more important during this pandemic. Participants in this study believe that students with varied learning needs require greater advocacy.

Joey echoed this idea,

> I would say that I have taken more of a warm but aggressive approach to assisting students this year because we have not had as many opportunities to learn about each other. If a student struggles with reading, then I share applications and websites that can assist with speaking written text. If a student struggles with typing, then I share applications and websites that can assist with dictation. Everyone has learning styles and needs.

He continues to share his efforts to support all his students, "If students do not respond to my written communications, then I send them videos of me asking them questions or explaining things."

Ronnie shared his struggles, "Serving the pedagogical needs of SPED students has been just as challenging. Here the specific challenge has been getting them involved on the virtual platform."

With similar instructional concerns, Ronald shared how he feels when serving students with varied learning needs.

> Addressing the needs of my special education students with the challenges of COVID19 is classical of the definition of navigating the uncharted waters. Talk about swimming at the deep end of this unfamiliar water with sharks, I am definitely in the midst of a "huge educational experiment" struggling to effectively provide my special education students with

services that are guaranteed to be delivered by law included in their IEP via online learning format. Shifting that entire process online is a monumental and daunting task! Even as a veteran teacher, I try to figure out how to navigate online learning and special education. Flexibility is the keyword for me.

Ricardo looks at all opportunities to properly serve his students with various learning styles. He explained how he asks for resources and support from colleagues, "I had to find creative ways to reach my students, get my resources and help from inclusion teachers. I also invited myself to IEP Team meetings through alternate means of communication."

Additionally, Claire shared her experience in servicing students with special needs, "I have a special education student and I address his needs by providing appropriate learning resources. I also stay in communication with the parent to create a partnership and create a support system."

However, Ramiro shared his approach to support his students, "I have 34 special needs learners and right now. I have been following up with their parents at least once a week to see how they are doing." He continued to explain how he maintains communication with all parents. "Parents have my google voice number to call me whenever they run into issues with the assignments. I usually send a text asking if they need assistance with the assignments or if they have questions during the middle of the week."

Graciela shared her difficulties in properly serving the students who have varied learning needs. She stated,

Students learn at different speeds and depths, and trying to monitor this learning is even more difficult in the virtual world. The best thing I can do as a teacher is to meet with students individually to help them build on their development. The hardest part is getting students to log in for multiple meetings.

Renata shared her practice during COVID times as students with special needs might get overwhelmed, especially if doing virtual instruction. She reflected on how she incorporates other approaches into her pedagogy.

We have practiced SEL strategies and breathing exercises to stay calm and not get frustrated with our activities. I also bought them coloring/word puzzle books so that when they are done with their activity, they can get a break. Those are just a few things I do to help with the emotional aspect of their needs because I don't want them to stop working and become overwhelmed.

Discussion

The data shows that participants in this study learned and defined how an educator can enact social justice practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The educators were able to transform their thinking and practice through a social justice lens. Their critical consciousness enabled their daily actions and words to impact students' lives and the people around them. Through their own lived experiences, they realized that education can be flawed with many injustices, inequities, and significant issues that can only be addressed through the fight for social justice from people who observe it and take action to do something about it. It's a fight that cannot happen alone. Kozol (2012) stated, "a system where some children are given the better opportunities, while others are

left in the dark. Children in districts having relatively low assessable property values are receiving no public education; rather, it is that they are receiving poorer quality education than that available to children in districts having more assessable wealth" (p.215).

However, funding cannot address everything in education. Kozol (2002) reminds us that teachers from poor urban schools are not prepared with the required skills to manage a classroom occupied mainly with students from different social realities and perspectives. Nonetheless, participants in this study advocated for educational practices to demonstrate the potential of children, regardless of the funding source.

The participants in this study revealed a practice of care towards their students as an authentic relationship between them. This relationship helped the participants embrace the practice of reflection to evaluate any issue or challenges they faced. As a result, andreminiscent of past experiences the participants saw a reflection of themselves in their respective students. These experiences seek to make an equitable and positive change for all students and participants in every teaching practice aspect. As reflected by the participants, social justice leadership is not to be seen in isolation in terms of skills but should be complexed through other competencies held to better make informed decisions with students' best interests in mind. Nieto (2006) stated that social justice "Challenges, confronts, and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences" (p. 2). She stressed the school-level approach to social justice, asking leaders to reform school policies and practices around behavior policies, school climate, family outreach, high-stakes testing, and others. Nieto (2006) further adds that for education to be rooted in social justice, it needs to be responsive to the language needs of linguistically diverse children. The participants in this study provided, through their reflections and testimonials, ways in which they serve children of diverse backgrounds.

Social justice leaders place race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalized factors at the center of their leadership practice and vision (Niño, Garza, & Rodríguez, 2018; Theoharis, 2009). Participants in this study shared their efforts to address these identities in the educational system. Additionally, the participants in the study acted on these beliefs about education by reflecting on "who we serve as educators, who has the right to attend schools, and the broader purpose(s) of education in contemporary times" (López, González, & Fierro, 2010, p.101). The central focus for social justice in education in the United States includes issues of educational equity for all students and educators' awareness of social diversity and critical consciousness (Grant & Sleeter, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008; Niño, Garza, Cordova, 2019). Equity-oriented work that educators embrace and practice provides better opportunities for all students to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally amid a pandemic.

As the participants in this study shared, many of them became advocates for their students and education in general. Many of them went through a similar experience as Michelle, who stated:

> Going through the USLC program has opened my eyes to see the realities of the school system outside of the four walls of the classroom. I have gained a deeper understanding of the inequalities that exist in the school system and how I can make changes from within as an educator.

For many participants, the pandemic influenced them to practice a more reflective approach in their pedagogy. Some participants prioritized the social-emotional aspect of students while not

neglecting the academics. Additionally, Onis shared, "Yet nothing could prepare me for the inevitable, the impact of this pandemic on the safety and emotional well-being of our students." Their action embraces a notion of care brought by their social justice preparation. Participants in this study embraced their identity as social beings and prioritized the need for personal relationships and collaboration. In order for students to learn, they commonly follow the same patterns of learning through collaboration, not isolation. Unfortunately, what gets prioritized in the school setting is "the academic domain at the expense of the social and emotional affective domain" (Reinhardt, 2019, p. 6).

Noddings (1984) described care as, "when we see the other's reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream" (p. 9). Many participants in the study, like Emily shared, "We were checking in on our families and their emotional well-being, which I believed was the right thing. No one was prepared for what was happening, emotionally, financially, especially our parents." To the participants, their role as educators leaned towards establishing a safe and caring learning environment for their students.

Conclusion

Some scholars claim that developing a social justice orientation among prospective school leaders is an arduous and time-consuming process. Leadership preparation programs can ill afford to admit students who do not already possess such an orientation (e.g., McKenzie et al., 2008). Other scholars argue that leadership programs, particularly those housed in public institutions, have an obligation to take students where they are and work to help them develop the knowledge and skills to be social justice leaders (Niño, Garza, & Rodríguez, 2018; Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007). This study suggests that leadership preparation programs can help students develop social justice orientations that benefit students even in the middle of educational shifts. However, more intentional efforts need to be made to address issues in education and the lack of resources that contribute to the inequities in the system.

While this study only highlights educators' experiences during a pandemic, much work goes on in the everyday practice of social justice educators. Leadership in education must expand to acknowledge the work teachers do from within the classroom. In the USLC approach, leadership is broad and inclusive so that the practice does not become exclusive, rather a more collaborative approach to facilitate change. The work done during the USLC experience is not easy; it takes passion, time, and belief in its mission and purpose. The participants in this study reflected on their journey and experiences as they navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. This study invites educational leaders to welcome new opportunities for learning and teaching leadership development. This paper intends to highlight the works of an award-winning program whose educators are authentically committed to doing equity-oriented work during a pandemic. The lessons learned from this program can be highlighted by USLC graduates, who, like the professors in this program, continue to challenge systems in professional settings.

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