

October 2019

## Being in Tension: Faculty Explorations of the Meaning of Social Justice in Teacher Education

Mary Shelley Thomas  
*University of Louisville*

Christine D. Clayton  
*Pace University*

Shin-ying Huang  
*National Taiwan University*

Roberto Garcia  
*University of Central Florida*

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### Recommended Citation

Thomas, M. S., Clayton, C. D., Huang, S., & Garcia, R. (2019). Being in Tension: Faculty Explorations of the Meaning of Social Justice in Teacher Education. *Excelsior: Leadership in Teaching and Learning*, 12 (1). <https://doi.org/10.14305/jn.19440413.2019.12.1.01> CCBY.

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# Being in Tension: Faculty Explorations of the Meaning of Social Justice in Teacher Education

Excelsior: Leadership in Teaching and Learning  
2019, Vol. 12(1) 17-36

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<https://doi.org/10.14305/jn.19440413.2018.12.1.01>

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M. Shelley Thomas<sup>1</sup>, Christine D. Clayton<sup>2</sup>, Shin-ying Huang<sup>3</sup>, and Roberto Garcia<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

This study explores faculty perspectives of social justice in teacher education within one New York institution with a social justice focus. Grounded in the institution's self-study process for accreditation, the researchers were a part of a team that collected data from structured interviews, including a card sort, of 42 full time teacher educators across 16 programs in the institution. Informed by sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991), a content analysis revealed the language selected by faculty as well as their meaning-making process and describes how individuals contextualized those meanings. Findings demonstrated a range of meanings and lack of a shared understanding about social justice. Even where apparent consensus existed around particular terminology, the content analysis revealed that individual meanings were deeply contextualized within disciplines and, thereby, were quite distinct. We raise questions regarding how to use dialogue as a meaning making process, the possibilities for a range of meanings, and the significance of contextualizing social justice. The study suggests that significant tensions remain but that "being in tension" is a critical position and potentially informative to faculty who might consider using a framework that invites more diverse perspective rather than embrace a unitary meaning of the term.

## Keywords

Social justice, Teacher educators, Teacher education, Teacher preparation program designs

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<sup>1</sup> University of Louisville

<sup>2</sup> Pace University

<sup>3</sup> National Taiwan University

<sup>4</sup> University of Central Florida

### Corresponding Author:

Dr. M. Shelley Thomas, Department of Middle and Secondary Education, University of Louisville, 1905 South 1<sup>st</sup> Street, Louisville, KY 40292

Email: [Shelley.thomas@louisville.edu](mailto:Shelley.thomas@louisville.edu)



*Social justice is about building a critical stance and working with educators. It requires an ability to work with educators as they face issues... One can be so critical of programs that one forgets that teachers have to walk in there every day and serve those children and parents. Social justice must be critical and extend beyond criticism. Social justice is to work with teachers. Social justice is being in tension.*

This quote describes one faculty member's understanding of the careful balancing act involved in pushing for social change while also working with teachers who are directly confronting inequities in schools. For this paper, we analyzed this perspective alongside the diverse views of other faculty colleagues at the same institution who were asked questions about their perspectives of social justice and their beliefs about the attributes of teachers with a social justice stance to understand how those teacher educators conceptualized social justice in their work. Using data from structured interviews, we discuss the range of meanings faculty members at this institution shared in order to contribute to similar discussions at other institutions and across the field of teacher education. Furthermore, we urge those committed to teacher education for social justice to engage in program dialogues about how they conceptualize the term as a first step in order to ensure their programs reflect those perspectives (Howell, Thomas, & Kapustka, 2010).

Many institutions proclaim their commitment to social justice as part of their mission and integrate social justice issues and theories within courses to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teacher candidates (Grant & Agosto, 2008). Use of the term, however, does not guarantee clarity (North, 2006) or enactment (Zeichner, 2016). While a popular term, concept, and approach in teacher education practice and research, definitions or frameworks for social justice are less frequently specific or useful enough to provide clarity and direction in order to impact institutional policy and practice (Howell, Thomas, & Kapustka, 2010; Kapustka, Howell, Clayton, & Thomas, 2009). Hollins and Guzman (2005) described the impact of social justice in teacher education as "inconsistent and inconclusive" (p. 479), a line of critique echoed by Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Shakman, & Terrell (2009) and, more recently, Dover (2015). Further, researchers associate "tensions" around social justice, as do we, within the theoretical work (North, 2006; North, 2008) and empirical investigations of social justice perspectives in new teachers (Boylan, & Woolsey, 2015). In a recent critique, Zeichner (2016) noted that both traditional, university-based programs and newer, "reform" programs based outside university settings, assert social justice stances but "often fail to practice what they preach" (p.3). In addition to analysis and critique, Zeichner called for teacher educators to acknowledge this inconsistency and, in response, enact practices consistent with social justice teaching. Previously, Guyton (2000) called for consideration of social justice to include how faculty members "grapple and define for themselves the concept of social justice" (p. 113). In that same light, Mills and Ballantine's (2016) systematic review of 10 years of literature on social justice in teacher education identified needed research questions and approaches. They determined that one underexplored, but necessary, direction in research explores "the pedagogy employed in teacher education, as well as the attitudes/beliefs of teacher educators" (p. 13). Like Zeichner (2016) and Guyton (2000), Mills and Ballantine (2016) redirect the focus to teacher educators.

Given the critical role faculty members play in promoting a social justice stance and the divergent ways they utilize the term, faculty members' conceptions of social justice seem increasingly important to discern. It is faculty, after all, who develop programs and teach the courses (e.g., Ritchie, An, Cone, &

Bullock, 2013) that would engage social justice as a central or as a peripheral concern. If they do not share a common conceptualization of what social justice means, then experiences of prospective teachers and, indeed, program coherence itself are in jeopardy; thus, our focus on the perspectives and beliefs of teacher educators at the same institution. To that end, we return to Mills and Ballantyne's (2016) assertion regarding the "value in research focusing on...attitudes/beliefs of teacher educators" (p. 13). By asking teacher educators about their perspectives regarding teacher education with a social justice stance, we sought to illuminate those beliefs.

Our study began when we were doctoral students. Through a seminar research project, we intended to better understand faculty members' perspectives in order to contribute to the social justice mission at a private, selective, research-oriented New York state institution that houses graduate programs in education and teacher education. Historically, the institution demonstrated a longstanding mission of promoting education as a lever for social change; its many faculty scholars had contributed to the professional discourse around these issues. At the time of this study, the phrase "social justice stance" was a key component of the institution's Conceptual Framework articulated for an accreditation review. The Conceptual Framework represented the shared vision and mission within and across a variety of educator preparation programs at the institution. Thus, the articulation of a social justice stance intended to "provide(s) the direction for the development of programs, courses, faculty teaching, research and service, candidates and faculty diversity" (Dottin, 2001, p. xiv).

Our interest was firmly rooted in a belief that a social justice stance is necessary in preparing prospective teachers. We were also aware of the lack of clarity of the term in the field. Thus, we initially explored how faculty members' conceptualizations of social justice, revealed through structured interviews and so critical to program coherence, were understood in an institution with an explicit, historical connection to a social justice mission. Now we are teacher educators at different institutional contexts who individually espouse social justice beliefs within institutions with varied commitments to that ideal. We agree with the aforementioned authors (e.g., Mills & Ballantyne, 2016) that, to realize social justice goals, teacher educators must consider the range of their perspectives, and how these varied understandings pivot on core beliefs about social justice. Those beliefs may influence how programs promote socially just beliefs and practices. In this paper, we describe an investigation of faculty members' conceptualizations of social justice we conducted as doctoral students, and we end with our own reflections on what significance this has for our roles as teacher educators today.

## Background

Historically, social justice in teaching has been a persistent force in the development of teacher education. The social reconstructionist tradition in education during the 1920s and 1930s framed schools as sites to redress social injustices (Zeichner, 1993). During that time period, both George Counts and John Dewey were associated with this tradition, with Counts' (1932) work *Dare the School Build a New Social Order* viewed as the fundamental text for this movement. At the time, even within the social reconstructionist movement, there were tensions and debates regarding the role of schools and the positions of teacher educators (Zeichner, 1993).

More recently, the literature pertinent to the current study documents that efforts to realize a social justice stance in teacher education result in tensions around the lack of consensus regarding terminology. While programs commonly assert a social justice stance as a goal (Zeichner, 2016), what such a stance means to individual educators within programs is rarely identified or agreed upon (Lee,

2011; Moule, 2005; Zollers, Albert, & Cochran-Smith, 2000). Often, the meanings vary and are contested within any one setting. For example, social justice may translate into multicultural education courses or placement of teacher candidates in racially and socioeconomically diverse educational settings (Ritchie, An, Cone, & Bullock, 2013). These different institutional structures, however, do not address questions regarding faculty members' conceptualizations of what social justice is. Other studies examine the understanding of social justice on the part of pre-service (e.g. Lee, 2011; Lemley, 2014) and current K-12 teachers enrolled in graduate programs (e.g. Baily & Katradis, 2016). Study results may speak to faculty members' conceptions indirectly but do not address or reveal perspectives systematically and explicitly (e.g. Chavez-Reyes, 2012; Dorman, 2012; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016; Ritchie, An, Cone, & Bullock, 2013).

Understanding teacher educators' conceptualization of a social justice stance is pertinent to the successful realization of that vision. Tatto (1996) found that preservice students' views were only marginally influenced by their programs' social justice stance; however, when their instructors promoted more developed views, preservice teachers' views moved toward those of their instructors. They recommended the development of program norms through dialogue as an important step. In line with Tatto's (1996) recommendations, findings from this study were reported to the faculty following data analysis in order to support ongoing dialogues at the institution. Specific information on how they responded as well as any resulting programmatic or curricular changes are outside the scope of the research described here.

Given the contested and underexplored notions of social justice in teacher education, three assumptions guide the research design, data analysis, and interpretations of the findings for the current study. First, improving practice is central to teacher education (Zeichner, 2012). Second, social justice perspectives contribute to improving teacher practice by pushing the field toward more critical and equitable stances (Conklin & Hughes, 2016). Third, improving teaching and teacher education requires moving away from notions of teaching as idiosyncratic and intuitive (Hollins, 2012) toward a robust, conceptually grounded understanding of teaching. The current study connects the third assumption to the first two, arguing for clarity around shared meanings of social justice. Indeed, Grant and Agosto (2008) assert that teacher educators have "focused attention on how teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions relate to social justice" (p. 179). However, they argue that though well-intended, "definitions, contexts, and assessment of social justice are rarely articulated" (p. 194). Further, these authors note that concepts are often reduced, decontextualized, and ahistorical. Their review of 39 articles on social justice demonstrates the range of perspectives and highlights the void regarding matters of "assessment of social justice in teacher education programs" (p. 195). In response, Grant and Agosto (2008) direct institutions to "...spell out their meanings of social justice and conceptual tools which will adjudicate the actions of teacher candidates and teacher educators..." (p. 186).

To address the need for research on the attitudes and beliefs of teacher educators towards social justice (Mills & Ballantine, 2016), we explore how teacher educators from the same institution view social justice and argue that deliberate, focused discussions that inform actions are essential for the faculty members across different programs to enact a coherent, consistent message about how such perspectives influence their programs' policies and practices. Such reliable, transparent messages can increase commitments to and collaboration toward shared goals within programs (Clayton, Howell, Kapustka, Thomas, & Vanderhaar, 2010). Research informing the field around the development and implementation of concepts such as social justice is also necessary as an intermediate step in order to illuminate the effects of institutional policies on the practice of teacher education (Tatto, Richmond, &

Carter Andrews, 2016) as well as the tensions inherent in developing a unifying conceptualization of a complex, contested set of ideas.

## Theoretical Framework

In describing the implications for the field on the development of program norms, Tatto (1996) urged for "consideration to the issues of coherence around socially constructed norms within and across teacher education programs and their effect on teachers' preparation in the context of the current educational reform" (p. 176). Though written over two decades ago, we find these insights pertinent. As authors from different sociohistorical backgrounds, we share common understandings regarding how sociocultural theory provides a lens through which to examine the dynamics of thought and language (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) within the context of social and cultural interaction (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Though each of us identifies as an educator, we do so from different vantage points in terms of gender, culture, and language. These diverse lenses brought unique perspectives and questions to the analyses. Thus, the emphasis on context and the dynamics of thought and language within sociocultural theory are particularly suitable to this inquiry for multiple reasons. First, given the critiques of decontextualized notions of social justice (Mills & Ballantine, 2016), a theoretical orientation attending to context asserts the import of context, making that visible. Next, by illuminating the social process of learning, we viewed our research methods, described next, as tools (Wertsch, 1991) that mediated understandings. Further, emphasis on the dialogic relationship between faculty members' understandings of social justice brings to light the relationships between individual responses and the institution's collective goal towards a social justice stance.

It is also important to note that our own location as educators shifted from the time we gathered the data. We began as graduate students, fairly new to the idea of theoretical frameworks guiding work in teacher education, but interested in examining social justice as a valued norm in teacher education at the institution where we were all enrolled at various stages of our doctoral work. We come back to this now, from diverse institutions and in different stages of our careers in higher education. During that time, teacher education has weathered consistent attacks on its legitimacy as a field. Critics claim that the policies and practices of education schools embracing a social justice stance promote a particular political perspective (Wasley, 2006). Such critics contend that social justice agendas promote groupthink (Leo, 2005; Will, 2006). Others describe social justice-oriented curricula as empty strategies supplanting content knowledge and adding to the declining performance of American students (Leo, 2005; Mac Donald, 1998). As a result, institutions employing social justice may encounter challenges or scrutiny (Rochester, 2017), and the value of social justice itself has often been sidelined as the fields of both teaching and teacher education have shifted their attention towards justifying their value to produce quality teachers who, in the context of accountability, can raise standardized test scores (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Mehta, 2013).

While these shifts have not altered our personal commitments to social justice in teacher education, these experiences provide us with more perspective on the teacher educators involved in our original study and the diverse perceptions and tensions that arise within the field when social justice is a goal to mediate among many competing priorities faced by institutions. Nevertheless, we find this work as timely, relevant, and necessary as we did when we were graduate students; indeed, the imperative to assert a social justice stance at this moment is worth revisiting in today's educational climate with its continued focus on accountability and test outcomes. The "dominant accountability paradigm"

(Cochran-Smith et al., 2018, p. 135) in teacher education which renders judgments about teacher quality in relation to the success of graduates' students on standardized tests runs counter to social justice values and, indeed, democratic norms. In brief, a teacher with a social justice orientation is less valued than one who can raise student scores. More than ever, clarity on the social justice agenda for teacher education is needed in light of this moment when such considerations are sometimes cast as too politically provocative or are even sidelined entirely in the pursuit of higher test scores as a gauge of teacher quality.

## Methods

This inquiry into the perspectives of social justice among teacher education faculty in one institution was rooted in and became part of an institution's self-study process for accreditation. Tatto, Richmond, and Carter Andrews (2016) contend that "...teacher education has often involved the resolution of contradictions created by questioning, implementing, and reflecting on the system" (p. 247). Because the faculty members viewed this study as an opportunity to explore and reflect upon personal and collective notions of social justice, they were willing to participate in individual structured interviews. Research methods and findings were later shared with the faculty in a formal presentation, documented as part of the accreditation self-study process.

We addressed two research questions: 1) What are the perspectives on social justice among teacher educators in one institution? 2) Given a set of attributes for a social justice stance culled from the literature to consider, what do faculty believe are important attributes for teachers who have such a stance? Data collection and analysis strategies considered the reflexivity between individual perspectives and the collective viewpoint implied by publicly naming a social justice stance in order to identify trends that clarify the diversity of perspectives within this faculty. We decided to conduct structured interviews designed to address the two research questions because our aim was to elicit the range of beliefs and perspectives existing at one teacher education institution with a longstanding commitment to social justice and a variety of programs that served particular disciplines and populations. Individual interviews would provide the strongest, most accessible data source to address our questions about faculty perspectives and beliefs. In doing so, we anticipated that findings from interviews would inform additional study into course syllabi and candidate experiences.

### *Data Collection*

Forty-two of the 44<sup>5</sup> full-time, tenured and tenure track faculty members in the 16 preservice teacher education programs participated in structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed.<sup>6</sup> Because of the nature of the questions and human subjects concerns about inadvertently identifying non-white members of the faculty, we did not collect demographic information or other variables unless individuals volunteered them in their comments. The interview protocol included four questions and a card sort activity. The first four questions asked about faculty members' conceptions of social justice in teacher education:

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<sup>5</sup> The other two faculty members were out of the country on sabbatical and not available to be interviewed.

<sup>6</sup> One participant asked not to be recorded. That interview was transcribed directly. A team of 11 graduate students conducted the individual interviews and transcribed them. The authors were among this team.

1. From your personal perspective, what does having a social justice stance in teacher education mean to you?
2. Do you believe the (name of program) currently has a social justice stance?
3. How do faculty know whether students have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with teaching for social justice?
4. From your personal perspective, how satisfied are you with the program's attention to teaching for social justice?

The protocol and technique for eliciting responder comments was drawn from Seidman's (2006) work on qualitative interviewing. The entire protocol was piloted and revised multiple times to ensure the instructions for the process were clear to participants and consistently administered. Interviewers provided prompts only if asked, and any prompts and all responses were noted in the transcripts. Other than responding to questions from participants, interviewers did not provide additional information to avoid influencing responses.

*Card Sort Activity.* The fifth question was a card sort activity. Card sorting, according to Anderson, Anderson, and Deibel (2004), "is a knowledge elicitation technique, in which participants are given a collection of items," which they are then to "partition...into groups based on their own criteria" (p. 1). To create the cards, a team of eleven doctoral students created the Social Justice in Teacher Education Card Sort (SJ-TECS), a set of hand-held cards, each listing one attribute associated with social justice. Attributes were identified through a two-step process. Using content analysis, with "social justice" and "teacher education for social justice" as key words, the aforementioned team reviewed and summarized literature to create a list of attributes. To refine the list, we used a systematic strategy of problem-solving known as Synectics (Gordon, 1971) to create categories and sub-categories. Key terms and ideas were listed, discussed, critiqued, and narrowed into three categories to ensure clarity. The final list of terms and ideas were realigned within the three categories to efficiently capture a range of perspectives. Attributes were organized into three categories: (1) *purposes of teacher education programs with a social justice stance*, (2) *attitudes and understandings encouraged in prospective teachers*, and (3) *approaches to curriculum, teaching and knowledge connected to teaching for social justice*. (See Appendix A for the interview protocol and Appendix B for the Card Sort Instructions).

For the fifth and final interview question, professors sorted the SJ-TECS cards. Interviewers did not ask for reactions to the attributes on the cards, but recorded anything said during the process. Their reactions were not solicited, though many reacted to their choices. That is, each participant was handed the cards from one category of the aforementioned categories at a time and asked to select one to three attributes from the set. As participants sorted the cards, any comments were recorded and included in the transcripts. Following the sorting activity for each category, participants were asked: Were there any attributes with which you were uncomfortable from the card sort activity? All responses were, again, recorded and analyzed.

### *Data Analysis*

With attention to sociocultural theory as well as the research questions, the four authors analyzed and coded the data using multi-step content analysis through a continual process of revisiting the data and



codes, individually and collectively (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) to match patterns in the themes identified during the interviews and to establish internal validity of emergent categories (Yin, 1994).

We began with independent, repeated readings of all transcripts in their entirety by all authors. Each author created open codes depicting an initial sense of the perspectives across the data as a whole. Collectively, we discussed these initial, open codes while repeatedly questioning one another for clarity with respect to decisions. Analytic notes of the discussions became the source for the sensitizing concepts later refined into more precise concepts and codes. Those codes were used by each researcher to complete a second, independent coding of the data. Afterward, we discussed inconsistencies and made collective decisions documented in analytic notes as well. Responses to the first question, *what does a social justice stance in teacher education mean to you*, in the interview protocol, were also used to triangulate responses to the card sort.

In this manner, we noticed patterns of agreement as well as subtle differences in language usage across participants. Likewise, we determined and applied decision rules and confirmed the consistent application of codes by each author across the data. In the final stage of analysis, we reexamined the data through the lens of the literature. Finally, each author completely re-coded all interview transcripts independently. We then repeated the collective decision-making process twice to ensure consistency as well as the reliability of the codes with attention to language choices as well as any striking imagery that arose, creating data displays and attending to regularly occurring language as well as language use that challenged other perspectives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This iterative process enabled the researchers to ensure “credible and transparent outcomes” (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 245).

Our analysis ultimately influenced our presentation of the findings. Analysis of responses to the first four interview questions generated descriptive narratives. Through that process, we recognized that those four questions, and particularly the first question, connected to the responses we received to the card sort. When participants discussed their card sort choices, their responses often clarified and expanded on their responses to the initial question about what a social justice stance in teacher education meant to them. Additionally, though the card sort presented forced choices, the design of that process allowed us to quantify responses and determine to what extent there was consensus among faculty. It also enabled participants to express positive and negative perspectives around common notions of social justice.

## Findings

The results of this study of faculty conceptions tell a complicated story about faculty’s beliefs and aspirations for social justice across programs in one large private university. Almost all participants recognized the social justice stance at the institution as an important element in learning to teach. Further, the findings reveal that they recognized that the social justice stance was not yet fully developed, articulated, and understood throughout the institution. We discuss general responses to the first four questions that show some basic patterns of response about social justice across programs in the university. This sets up our discussion of the results of the card sort in relation to these responses.

Responses to the first four questions addressed a range of ideas that represented social justice as philosophical stances, postures toward teaching and the world, and the development of awareness of difference and of disparities. A few named actions and practices. These meanings were often framed within disciplines and societal contexts. A small number of participants defined social justice absent an explicit connection to teacher education.

All but six participants believed their programs had a social justice stance to varying degrees, ranging from "more or less" to "absolutely." Many, however, critiqued those stances as more implicit than explicit and qualified that the program's social justice stance could be better articulated. They used assignments, lectures, and field experiences or practicums to determine if students had a social justice stance. Some saw this stance in relation to shifts in students' dispositions, but, when they did so, participants critiqued the use of checklists that would diminish the significance of those dispositions. Though most said they were satisfied, generally, with their programs' stance, a large number added that they could do more. The remaining six faculty, who didn't necessarily believe their programs had a social justice stance, gave ambiguous answers that mentioned program improvements; they did not affirm or deny that the program had a social justice stance, or they did not answer the question at all.

When asked how faculty knew whether students have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with teaching for social justice, two faculty did not respond, and one maintained there was no formal assessment. Others indicated they used assignments such as stand-alone papers, projects, and field experiences or practicums to determine if students had a social justice stance. There were also those who raised concerns about the use of assessment to quantify social justice in ways that could diminish its underlying principles or impact.

As described earlier, the card sort further illuminated the meaning of social justice in teacher education among these faculty members. Participants' use of language during this activity expanded upon, clarified, and in some instances, critiqued other meanings of social justice. That is, the range of meanings suggested there was not a shared understanding across the faculty. Results of the entire card sort are quantified in Table 1.

To report these results, we share responses across the three categories in the card sort concluding with faculty responses about card sort attributes with which they were uncomfortable. As discussed previously, individual faculty are not identified, but their direct quotes are designated using quotation marks in the next sections.

### *Purposes of Social Justice in Teacher Education*

In the category *purposes of teacher education programs with a social justice stance*, the attribute, *developing critical perspectives*, was selected by 50% of faculty. Those who discussed this attribute, however, framed their choice using four different emphases for "critical perspectives." Though the attribute was selected by half of the participants, when they elaborated further, individuals shared different foci including developing *awareness* in teacher education students, *promoting understanding* in students, that expressed a need for students to *analyze certain aspects of teaching*, and that indicated students should *examine their positions* with respect to children in schools or to society. Five responses expanded the notion of critical perspectives to include the *development of a propensity toward action in students*. These categories were not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the overlap raises further questions about how "critical" was understood.

The attribute, *working toward equity*, was selected by 45% of the faculty. Although individuals often discussed the need for understanding or raising awareness of inequities, views on preparing teachers to work toward equity were much less clearly articulated. There was, however, a high level of agreement about its importance as a *purpose*. In responding to the first question in the protocol, three individuals framed working toward equity in terms of both equal access and opportunity in the K-12 curriculum. For example, one professor spoke about her discipline as an avenue for "thinking and

expressing available for *all* children.” Curriculum designs that enabled multiple access points into a discipline were mentioned as well as were inclusive practices.

Table 1  
*Attributes in card sort and results of faculty selections (N = 42)*

Category	Category rank order	Attribute	Faculty selections % (n)
Purposes	1	Develop critical perspectives*.	50 (21)
	2	Prepare teachers to work toward equity in society.	45 (19)
	3	Prepare teachers to teach in a democratic society.	33 (14)
	4	Prepare teachers who will facilitate social change.	33 (14)
	5	Prepare teachers to engage in social action.	26 (11)
	6	Prepare teachers to disrupt the status quo.	21 (9)
	7	Empower prospective teachers.	19 (8)
	8	Future teachers create their own personal vision*.	14 (6)
Attitudes	1	Value and understand diverse learners.	43 (18)
	2	Engage in reflective practice.	29 (12)
	3	View teaching as a moral & political act.	29 (12)
	4	Take an inquiry stance toward teaching.	26 (11)
	5	Understand role of power & oppression in society.	26 (11)
	6	Negotiate & renegotiate beliefs & practices.	14 (6)
	7	Understand conceptions of social justice.	14 (6)
	8	Challenge “isms” (racism, classism, sexism, etc)*.	12 (5)
	9	Develop ethics of caring.	10 (4)
	10	Develop a socio - political conscience.	10 (4)
	11	Know themselves.	7 (3)
	12	Value collaboration.	7 (3)
	13	View teachers as change agents.	7 (3)
	14	Have affirming sense of students.	5 (2)
	15	Understand the change process.	5 (2)
Approaches	1	Use culturally responsive pedagogy.	45 (19)
	2	Integrate life experiences of students and teaching*.	33 (14)
	3	Create of community of learning.	33 (14)
	4	Adopt inclusive practices.	29 (12)
	5	Run a democratic classroom.	21 (9)
	6	Aim for transformative learning.	19 (8)
	7	Differentiate the curriculum.	17 (7)
	8	Enact a constructivist approach to learning.	14 (6)
	9	Develop a multicultural curriculum.	10 (4)
	10	Integrate service learning into the curriculum.	2 (1)

*Note.* “\*\*” indicates attribute was truncated for listing in the table.

Others discussed equity in more systemic terms. One commented on “systemic inequities” and named the lack of resources available to particular schools and communities. Another spoke about candidates’ need for awareness not only of these inequities in school and the larger society but also of “how schools function to maintain or ameliorate the status quo.” Equitable practice, in this sense, meant that teachers would learn how to address these inequities through schooling and classroom practices.

### *Attitudes and Understandings*

For the category *attitudes and understandings encouraged in prospective teachers*, the attribute, *valuing and understanding diverse learners*, was selected by 43% of individuals as an attitude and understanding to be nurtured in a teacher education program with a social justice stance. No other attribute in this category demonstrated this level of agreement. Most who discussed this attribute used terms including awareness, acknowledgment, understanding, respect, and appreciation. For example, one talked about the need to help candidates understand and appreciate differences in relation to their own personal experiences, which were assumed to be less diverse: “If you’ve never been made aware of other issues, if you’ve never...worked in a different country or in a different culture, it does give you a totally different perspective on everything.” Another viewed understanding and valuing “diverse people” as the foundation for developing “an appropriate stance toward them.”

A smaller group called for greater attention to social disparities and considerations of power, politics, and oppression. Though their comments were brief, these individuals extended the meaning of this attribute beyond affirming and respecting. For them, the link to a social justice stance was also about raising critical awareness of the issues—particularly, the disparities—facing diverse learners in schools.

### *Approaches to Teaching and Curriculum*

Next, the category *approaches to curriculum, teaching and knowledge connected to teaching for social justice* generated some overlap with previous attributes. While in a different category, some of the ideas that surfaced around *using culturally responsive pedagogy* paralleled those that emerged in discussions on diverse learners. This attribute was selected by 45% of the participants. In contrast, some reacted to this category with some disdain and confusion. At least three commented that the attributes in this category were “slogans” or “buzz words,” dismissing them as “atheoretical”; others expressed discomfort with terms in this category.

Several indicated that they had difficulty distinguishing this attribute from another card in this category—*developing a multicultural curriculum*. Indeed, many linked these two attributes. As one said, “Culturally responsive pedagogy is the way the teacher sees how he or she or the students realize that [multicultural curriculum].” Likewise, the attribute *using culturally responsive pedagogy* was described as “attending to the individual and the communities of children and finding out who they are” for the purposes of incorporating it into curriculum and instruction. Personal knowledge of students and their communities were the basis of a culturally responsive pedagogy.

### *Faculty’s Explanations of Uncomfortable Attributes*

As described previously, the next part of the card sort requested participants to identify attributes with which they felt uncomfortable. Seventeen of the 42 (40.5%) responded that there were no attributes with which they were uncomfortable; fifty-nine percent (59.5% n=27) identified at least one. Table 2

lists those attributes in order. Among those who identified attributes with which they were uncomfortable, 22 explained their critiques, further informing the range of individual meanings of social

Table 2

*Card sort attributes faculty identified they are “uncomfortable with” (N = 42)*

Category	Category rank order	Attribute	Faculty selections % (n)
Purposes	1	Prepare teachers to disrupt the status quo.	29 (12)
	2	Have future teachers create their own personal vision*.	29 (12)
	3	Empower prospective teachers.	26 (11)
	4	Prepare teachers for teaching in a democratic society.	15 (6)
	5	Prepare teachers who will facilitate social change.	12 (5)
	6	Prepare teachers to engage in social action.	10 (4)
	7	Prepare teachers to work toward equity in society.	7 (3)
	8	Develop critical perspectives*.	0 (0)
Attitudes	1	Know themselves.	17 (7)
	2	Develop a socio - political conscience.	12 (5)
	3	Understand conceptions of social justice.	10 (4)
	4	Challenge “isms” (racism, classism, sexism, etc)*.	7 (3)
	5	View teaching as a moral & political act.	7 (3)
	6	Develop ethics of caring.	5 (2)
	7	Have affirming sense of students.	5 (2)
	8	Understand role of power & oppression in society.	5 (2)
	9	Engage in reflective practice.	5 (2)
	10	Negotiate & renegotiate beliefs & practices.	5 (2)
	11	View teachers as change agents.	2 (1)
	12	Value and understand diverse learners.	2 (1)
	13	Take an inquiry stance toward teaching.	2 (1)
	14	Value collaboration.	2 (1)
	15	Understand the change process.	2 (1)
Approaches	1	Develop a multicultural curriculum.	20 (8)
	2	Run a democratic classroom.	17 (7)
	3	Enact a constructivist approach to learning.	12 (5)
	4	Create of community of learning.	7 (3)
	5	Aim for transformative learning.	7 (3)
	6	Integrate service learning into the curriculum.	7 (3)
	7	Differentiate the curriculum.	7 (3)
	8	Use culturally responsive pedagogy.	5 (2)
	9	Integrate life experiences of students and teaching*.	0 (0)
	10	Adopt inclusive practices.	0 (0)

*Note.* “\*” indicates attribute was truncated for listing in the table.

justice. Critiques stressed the need to contextualize social justice perspectives as well as the need for thoughtful consideration of the impact of such perspectives.

Faculty critiques fell into three overlapping categories. Participants critiqued attributes for clarity, problematized attributes, countering them with questions or concerns, or regarded them as not applicable to social justice. Most often, attributes were challenged as “unclear” or “vague.” Participants questioned the clarity of attributes 13 times. For example, the attribute constructivist approach in the category of *Approaches*, prompted comments including “Doesn’t mean anything” and “what does it mean?” Almost as frequently, attributes were problematized. In 12 instances, participants directed attention to their concerns about an attribute. *Disrupt the status quo* was questioned “to what end” and “there is not enough emphasis on what is going to replace the status quo.” Other reasons participants found attributes problematic are typified by the critical question posed about the attribute *develop a multicultural curriculum*: “vague, whose notion?”

Four faculty explained that attributes they selected were “not applicable.” For one participant, *ethic of caring* was “assumed in the field.” Another considered a constructivist approach “not the place to begin for some children.” Importantly, given this range of meanings, social justice was most usefully and clearly conceptualized when it aligned to the pedagogy of teacher education -to teaching and teaching about teaching.

## Discussion

As described by Loughran, (2006), the pedagogy of teacher education addresses two functions: teaching and teaching about teaching. The findings in this study documented how teacher educators envisioned social justice within both teaching and teaching about teaching. Attending to the thoughts of the participants, as described by their language choices (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996), revealed a range of individual meanings of social justice in teacher education among those at one institution, mirroring previous observations that models of social justice in teacher education represent diverse and often conflicting theoretical frameworks and perspectives (Grant & Agosto, 2008; North, 2006, 2008). Where apparent consensus existed around particular terminology, there was a range of meanings asserted by individuals who spoke about social justice within various contexts.

Despite some consensus among faculty around purposes, attitudes, and curricular approaches, closer examination of responses suggests agreement masks significant tensions. We identified patterns and ranges that cut across all categories in the data examined: (1) *purposes of teacher education programs with a social justice stance*, (2) *attitudes and understandings encouraged in prospective teachers*, and (3) *approaches to curriculum, teaching and knowledge connected to teaching for social justice*.

First, we found a significant range of reactions among individuals who discussed social justice in terms of developing understanding or raising awareness; their deliberations focused primarily on nurturing and transforming individual beliefs and values without mention or clarification of any particular action toward which such changed views would be directed. In some instances, explanations of discomfort with attributes elicited important clarifying perspectives. Several raised concerns that teacher education was trying to do too much or impose on already beleaguered beginning teachers by specifying particular activist orientations and approaches. One captured this feeling, expressing a reluctance to “use our teacher education program” to promote “teachers functioning as community activists.”

At the other end of this continuum, we also noted faculty members who talked more explicitly about social justice in teacher education as an impetus for candidates to make change in education and across society in general. They described teacher education for social justice as developing “change agents” to engage critically in somewhat unspecified actions. Individuals acknowledged a progression from raising awareness to taking action, suggesting awareness and action are not necessarily mutually exclusive; further, progression from one to the other may not be linear. Indeed, both awareness and action were described reflexively by some as critical to practices that engage candidates in social justice. As one professor reflected, “But when I think of social justice, I think of understanding fairness and trying to do something about it, and action, so awareness and action.” The range of meanings embraced by faculty members pivoted around a central issue: whether social justice in teacher education is restricted to a focus on nurturing and developing individual beliefs or whether that awareness is directed toward specific actions to bring about change in education or society in general.

We also observed patterns in the assumptions made by faculty members about the beneficiaries of a social justice agenda in teacher education. While almost all made references to students in B-12 education and the desire to raise awareness and/or take actions to address inequities among that population, the underlying assumption about who was to be changed or, indeed, affected by a social justice agenda pivoted around the candidates and the schools in which they teach, or around teacher educators themselves and the entire enterprise of teacher education at their institution. It was common for faculty members to talk in terms of working with candidates “to make them aware” and to “educate them well so that they’ll be able in very concrete ways to deal with those disparities.” While the emphases differed, many described social justice as a means to bring about change in the teacher education candidate, which would in turn affect wider change in B-12 education.

In contrast, an even larger number spoke about social justice in teacher education in terms of their practice as teacher educators as well as in regard to the policies and practices at their institution. Several discussed a “commitment to how do we treat each other and how do we work together,” specifying that “treating one another in a humanistic way” was a part of representing what good education for social justice is and could be. Many also described social justice in terms of the policies of the institution where they worked. They referenced issues of access, equity, and fairness “across the program” and across departments. Some talked about the distribution of resources while others critiqued the nature of the institution itself:

I think that for social justice to really work, we have to begin at home. I question the hierarchical nature of our institution ... it mirrors the kind of structure that is so deleterious to the things that I’ve just discussed and the frameworks that you would like to encourage, and I think we need to reexamine, we need to find a more democratic way of operating our teacher education programs.

This range of meanings highlights other questions about the impact of social justice: Who should be changed by an emphasis on social justice in teacher education? Is it just about candidates or is it also about teacher educators?

Importantly, faculty linked conceptions of social justice in pragmatic ways to their disciplines and to their positions as teacher educators working with candidates who in turn will work with children in classrooms. In several instances, individuals clarified their perspectives, explaining that contextual information was vital to understanding conceptions of social justice. For example, a science teacher educator associated social justice with more equitable science curriculum. Another insisted that exploring questions about “what does good science and math education mean” and “who does science” are grounded as social justice issues within the field.

As they explained their perspectives, faculty members addressed concerns that social justice was a vague or meaningless, jargon-laden term. One remarked that terms associated with social justice in the abstract were too vague. However, contextualizing these terms made them meaningful.

Several also voiced concerns and questions about the overall use of social justice in teacher education, the nature of accreditation and accountability, and how this context shapes social justice. Others discussed tensions inherent when teaching about social justice, noting that some candidates were not receptive to particular conceptions. As instructors, they were cautious not to disengage students by appearing preachy. One described this process as a “nuanced dance.” She expressed her concerns about the enactment of social justice and emphasized the nature of conversations as essential.

Faculty also cautioned against “cookie cutter models” that reduced social justice to “checklists.” Several described terms such as “critical” and “challenging” as problematic and vague. These individuals explained, again, that in the abstract, these words were less meaningful than when explained in contexts and with examples that reference programs or disciplines. As they explained their reactions to attributes associated with social justice, faculty offered insights to address those concerns, recommending that rich, meaningful connections operationalize perceptions of social justice, address the role it takes in particular contexts, and consider the implications of such conceptions to redress inequities.

The range of meanings associated with social justice across interview responses highlighted contrasting and competing perspectives on what should the struggle for social justice encompass and who stands to benefit from engagement in that work. Surfacing these different perspectives that pivot on such critical questions is an important practice in which teacher educators need to engage if they hope to articulate and enact a more robust program that integrates social justice. Decisions regarding specific policies and practices that are then informed by that data and contextually informed can evolve from that critical initial step.

## Conclusion

This study is grounded on key assumptions: the central and urgent need to improve teaching practice (Zeichner, 2012), the belief that social justice perspectives contribute to improving practice (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2009; Conklin & Hughes, 2016), and, finally, the need for robust, conceptually grounded understanding of teaching for social justice in order to do so (Hollins, 2012). To those ends, we recommend that teacher educators within institutions as well as across the field grapple with how social justice practices are implemented in their programs in very specific ways. Within our own current institutions, we find this to be both critical and challenging, reflecting claims that social justice remains “under researched” (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016, p. 1), and programs espousing the term do not reflect it in practice (Zeichner, 2016).

As both the literature and the experiences of these participants demonstrate, there are considerable differences, even among supporters of social justice in teacher education, about what it means to particular individuals within distinct programs. Developing more coherent, substantive, and textured understandings of what social justice means across a faculty is an important step towards determining how these conceptions translate into practice for teacher education, and ultimately, classroom teaching. Yet significant tensions remain, and our analysis suggests that “being in tension,” or embracing the questions they pose, is a potentially informative state for a faculty embracing a social justice stance. In other words, how might tensions around enacting social justice push teacher educators conceptually and even in terms of the language that is used? Given critiques from the current participants around



language (e.g., “constructivist approaches’ doesn’t mean anything”), what language better captures the nuance and actions of social justice approaches? These questions, and others, such as “social justice for whom” and “to what end,” generated by insiders about their own programs, offer a framework for teacher educators to consider as they work toward practicing what they preach. Furthermore, we recommend that faculty consider, for example, the purposes, attitudes, and approaches as they work toward specificity not simply in defining existing terms, but also in describing what a social justice stance means for their programs as well as how they enact those meanings (Zeichner, 2016). In discussing the purposes, attitudes, and approaches towards social justice teacher education, faculty will transform language to better capture the rich diversity of meanings in a growing field.

Questions and concerns remain regarding the role of assessment (Grant & Agosto, 2008) of social justice in teacher education particularly regarding how social justice could be conceptually reduced to a mere checklist of behaviors or dispositions rather than subjected to more meaningful debate and discussion within the academy. As we participate now as teacher educators ourselves, we see how this tension of what we believe and aspire for our programs plays out within the context of accreditation and other accountability pressures on higher education where what is valued gets measured. In that effort to respond to those pressures, our study reminds us that the complexity of social justice in teacher education requires more than assessments, rubrics, and curriculum maps; discussion of faculty perspectives remains central, if elusive and sometimes problematic.

Further, our investigation suggests that purposeful discussions that articulate not just the common beliefs about social justice but also their diverse meanings is needed. Such processes, in fact, are essential for those institutions that decide to hold themselves accountable to social justice perspectives—not only within programs but, even more critically, to candidates and the communities these institutions ultimately serve (Zeichner, 2016). While an accreditation process necessitates some consensus with the need to represent institutional views, such documents can become meaningless tools without truly shared discussion and agreement. As one faculty member reflected, “I think it’s a bit like having a boat with a splendid sail and a great crew ... but you don’t have a rudder.” Indeed, most of the discussion around “uncomfortable attributes” concerned the vagueness or lack of clarity around terms. Still, scholars like North (2006) resist offering a unified view of social justice as it seems to contradict the notion of embracing diversity that is foundational to a social justice stance. Instead, North offers a coherent framework that highlights the relational tensions embedded in the term. Such a framework would, in fact, provide a similar “rudder” for faculty intent on enacting a social justice stance that may take into account a diversity of perspectives.

Considering the conflicting needs to reflect all voices as well as to subsume that diversity within a common message, future research should examine how faculties work through, mitigate, or embrace their own tensions, as well as how those efforts result in the next phases of curricular alignment and impact on graduates (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). Future research should describe how faculties resolve, and, in some cases, confront conflicting meanings of social justice in order to promote a vision for teaching for social justice in their curricula, pedagogy, and other institutional practices. This is not because we feel faculty should prescribe a set of theories to learn, authors to espouse, or strategies to implement in order to claim to be “doing social justice” in teacher education. Instead, our research suggests faculty need to flesh out their underlying meanings about social justice so they can be clearer and more transparent about how and *why* they are enacting particular curricula, pedagogies, and institutional practices that they claim under the mantle of social justice for greater coherence and impact. Such efforts to articulate and communicate conceptions of social justice assist in revealing differences in conceptual underpinnings and in identifying areas of broad agreement. Identification of a common vision

for social justice in programs enables faculty to define and apply those visions in their work with candidates. Perhaps, indeed, faculties that address these questions recognize that social justice itself, as the participant quoted at the beginning, is “being in tension.” The concept of “tension” evokes an awkward balance, an unresolved issue, a sense of being pulled in different directions simultaneously, perhaps causing feelings of discomfort. All of these ideas capture the dynamic of a faculty making meaning around a social justice stance. We urge teacher educators to continue to work toward clarity of the diverse meanings they hold regarding social justice. The revelation of that diversity may illuminate a richer implementation of practices that ultimately support program goals.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for this research.

### ORCID ID

M. Shelley Thomas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8796-1303>

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#### Appendix A Interview Protocol

1. From your personal perspective, what does having a social justice stance in teacher education mean to you?
2. Do you believe the (name of program) currently has a social justice stance?
3. How do faculty know whether students have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with teaching for social justice?
4. From your personal perspective, how satisfied are you with the program's attention to teaching for social justice?

#### Appendix B Card Sort Instructions

In closing, I would like to share with you some ideas from the literature on teaching for social justice. We have been struck with the diversity of opinions about what a social justice stance might entail in teacher education. On this set of cards, we have noted some of the *purposes* of a teacher education programs with a social justice stance.

On the second set of cards, we have noted some of the *attitudes and understandings* that are encouraged in prospective teachers.

On the third set of cards, we have noted some of the *approaches to curriculum/teaching and knowledge* found in the literature on teaching for social justice

We will be working with each separately. Here is the first set on purposes. Please flip through the cards. Look for the one or two *purposes* that come closest to your own views of the *purposes* of a teacher education program with a social justice stance. Please flip through them again and let me know if there are any purposes with which you are not comfortable.

The process was repeated for *attitudes and understandings* followed by *approaches to curriculum/teaching and knowledge*.