

## Pre-service Teachers' Leading and Teaching for Social Justice

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**ABSTRACT** Scholars in education acknowledge the crucial role that pre-service teachers can play in addressing issues of equity and social justice in schools. Addressing the sources of injustice in schools and society requires pre-service teachers to become leaders who foster successful, equitable and socially responsible learning practices. In this paper, the researchers report on the responses of third-year pre-service teachers in a B.Ed. course at a South African university. Applying social justice principles, a discourse analysis was conducted in which pre-service teachers' perceptions about democracy, race and oppression were analyzed. Utilizing Critical Social Theory, their personal belief systems, commitment to democracy and taking responsibility for social thinking and transformation, were interrogated. The findings reveal that this critical social interaction affords pre-service teachers the possibilities of undergoing value-change in terms of their individual attitudes, preferences and intentions in order to teach and lead for social justice in schools.

### INTRODUCTION

As newly appointed educators, the fate of pre-service teachers is sealed, as they have to contend with diverse learning environments characterized by different challenges. Competencies including the ability to support the learning of learners in schools, raising critical issues concerning equity and privilege and the ability to provide leadership as a collective responsibility for school improvement exist in their future path (Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy 2005). In the context of democratic education, competencies including sociocultural consciousness, adopting responsible teaching strategies and having an affirming attitude toward learners from culturally diverse backgrounds should form part of pre-service teachers' professional development (Kea et al. 2006). Most advocates of social justice education note that preparing pre-service teachers to teach in such learning environments and challenge oppression, is difficult work which faces a multitude of barriers (Pace 2014). As such, democratic education requires pre-service teachers to lead and teach for social justice and to combat oppressive practices, while creating an equal and dignified classroom environment. Although many scholars agree that theory, research and practice should be intertwined to support the type of schooling (and society) that values, rather than marginalizes, few scholars offer

groundbreaking, pragmatic approaches to developing truly transformative leaders (Brown 2004).

In South Africa, the national policy requires that all teachers are socially just teachers, with education being perceived as a perfect tool to realize the ideals of democracy, and to lead people to become critical citizens with the mandate to play a pivotal role in the transformation of society (Msila 2013). By weaving a tripartite theoretical framework together in support of alternative transformative pedagogy, pre-service teachers learn to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against oppressive elements of reality (Freire 1994). Similarly, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) emphasize the need for education institutions to develop justice-oriented citizens who look at social, political and economic problems systematically and engage in collective strategies for change.

The imperative in this paper therefore, is to engage pre-service teachers in dialogue about their perceptions of oppression, race and democracy as products of both apartheid discourses and discrimination so that as post-apartheid teachers, they may be inspired to teach and lead for social justice. Utilizing Critical Social Theory as the research lens, their personal belief systems, ideals, commitment to democracy and their responsibility for social thinking and transformation, were interrogated. In this paper, the researchers outline the conceptual framework for pre-service teachers engaging in social justice

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teaching and leadership and propose best practice methods to achieve this. The researchers foreground the argument that in order to deepen social justice discourse, an understanding of leading and teaching for social justice in the context of multicultural schools, such as in South Africa, become all important.

### **Towards A Socially Just Pedagogy: Best Practice Methods for Leading and Teaching For Social Justice**

Understanding the notion of equality and democratic change in schools and enacting the principles of social justice may be regarded as an important competency for teachers. In this regard, Freire (1970) contends that becoming a subject in history capable of overcoming and transforming the world, implies that teachers work with learners to develop critical consciousness and dialogue. For educators in leadership roles or those preparing to assume leadership roles within the ambit of social justice and the actions to be taken in schools to promote social justice, it is necessary to engage in a meaningful dialogue to take action to correct any injustice of which they are aware (Vogel 2010). Educating learners from differing cultures is an increasingly critical challenge to which pre-service teachers as leaders must respond.

In South Africa apartheid failed to address the challenge of difference among schools (Msiila 2013). Scholars who focus on leadership as a way to impact these schools have done significant work, for example, on school turnaround (Duke 2012, 2013; Leithwood et al. 2010; Murphy and Meyers 2008), as well as school reform, effectiveness, improvement and change (Hallinger 2003; Harris 2006; Heck and Hallinger 2010; Jackson 2000; Nicolaidou and Ainscow 2005; Reynolds et al. 2000). All these studies indicate the importance of understanding leadership in schools (Medina et al. 2014). Disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes among learning communities distinguished by differences in race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation primary language suggest an education system that is *unjust* and even oppressive (Dantley and Tillman 2010). In this regard, Shields (2010) assert that schools are characterized by cultural politics that serve to reproduce and perpetuate some inequities and to confirm and legitimate some cultures, while others are margin-

alized. This view supports Freire's (1990) argument that education systems produce and reproduce oppression. Moreover, these persistent inequalities demand new approaches to educational leadership. In this regard, Foster (1986) cites Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) and notes that social justice in educational leadership presupposes the development and liberation of human souls in a process that is defined by its inclusiveness and activism. In fact, inclusion is often considered as synonymous with social justice outcomes (Furman 2012). As Marshall and Oliva (2010) explain: 'leadership for social justice investigates and poses solutions for issues that generate and reproduce societal inequities'.

The persistence of demands for transformation and retributive justice in South Africa in the early 2000s saw an increasing shift from a dominant, essentialist discourse of race to a discourse of social inequality along racial lines, even though the latter often remains couched in essentialist terms (Emden 2013). A study investigating school administrators' perceptions about the role and importance of equity, diversity and social justice in new teacher induction in the province of Ontario reveals that they regularly prioritize technical issues, such as classroom management and pedagogy over systemic issues, such as equity and social justice, while ignoring new teachers' abilities to counter systemic oppression (Pinto 2012). Although social justice is a policy prescript instituted to meet democratic ideals in post-apartheid South Africa, this will not, by itself, make schools socially just. It will depend on the extent to which educational leaders at different levels of the system embrace social justice and create conditions in which it can thrive (Mafora 2013). In the same vein, the current practice predominantly promotes a decontextualized celebration of multiple identities and difference without addressing the critical issues of power and social forces (Desai et al. 2004; Lynch and Baker 2005; Gachago et al. 2013). In addition to reporting on pre-service teachers' perceptions of democracy and race, this paper highlights perceptions of power and privilege, as well as their overall feelings of psychological discomfort when interacting closely with others whom they perceive to be culturally different. Engaging in issues of power and privilege in the classroom does not come naturally for teachers for fear of the highly explosive emo-

tions that might emerge (Gachago et al. 2013). However, proponents of the affective turn argue that it is important to address the emotions that govern classrooms if social transformation in learners is to happen. Likewise, in undergoing value-change in a period of rapid social change globally and in South Africa in particular, pre-service teachers possessing social justice leadership teaching skills may positively influence educational practice in a bid to achieve social justice.

The literature on leadership for social justice reveals a set of common themes which include that it is action-oriented and transformative, committed and persistent, inclusive and democratic, rational and caring, reflective and oriented toward a socially just pedagogy (Furman 2012). Perhaps the most prevalent theme in the literature is that social justice leaders are proactive change agents, engaged in transformative leadership (Shields 2003). Pre-service teachers as leaders need to embody a social justice consciousness within their own belief systems or values. This includes needing to possess a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including White privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny and ethnocentrism (Capper et al. 2006). The researchers contend that such engagement is beneficial as it propels the notion that diversity should be understood as varied perspectives and approaches that people of different cultural groups bring to their particular cultural and sociopolitical context. In this regard, culturally responsive leadership occurs when administrators function in their roles as public intellectuals, curriculum innovators, and social activists (Johnson 2006). Similarly, Gooden (2010) and Medina et al. (2014) suggest that culturally responsive leadership actively and persistently pursues achievement equity, while supporting teaching practices that incorporate culture as a means to teach and empower learners.

Studies by scholars interested in the leadership practices of Black school leaders in the US indicate the inclusion of a demonstrated commitment to (1) the education of African American children and to challenging racism, (2) compassion for and understanding of their learners and communities, (3) cultivating a desire to empower learners by helping them identify alternative behaviors when faced with confrontational situations, (4) setting high standards for themselves as teachers and learners, and (5) being

confident about the ability of African American children to learn (Case 1997; Khalifa 2011; Lomotey 1987, 1989, 1990; Morris 1999, 2004; Pollard 1997; Reitzug and Patterson 1998).

In other words, grounded by their own experiences and their knowledge of their communities, Black school leaders in the US who provide leadership in predominantly Black communities lead with a practical and lived compassionate understanding of their communities (Gooden 2005) coupled with the expectation of high academic achievement for their learners. They may reform, align or expand curricula, thus making it more accessible or appropriate for target populations. They may, as asserted by Khalifa (2012), practice a type of 'nuanced culture-specific leadership'. Moreover, these leaders may also promote the understanding and practice of critical multiculturalism by using culturally responsive leadership (Gooden 2010). Research that features the perspectives of leaders of color reveals a tendency toward leadership practices that are both critical and multicultural. The dimension of applied critical leadership, which is sometimes embedded in transformative leadership, is indicative of leaders able to consider the complexity of positioning their organizations within greater sociopolitical and socio-historical realities (Quantz et al. 1991). These leaders tend to work from within dominant or mainstream paradigms to exercise 'effective oppositional power, to resist courageously and to be activists and voices for change and transformation' (Shields 2010). As such, the purpose of this paper is to contribute toward pre-service teachers' future practice, so that they may lead and teach for social justice by increasing their awareness of implicit and explicit forms of oppression and inspiring them to embrace anti-oppressive pedagogies and practices.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper utilizes Critical Social Theory as a tool to 'encourage the production and application of theory as part of the overall search for transformative knowledge' (Leonardo 2004). To gain understanding, Habermas (1996) proposes accounts of how conversation should be conceived in order to move toward mutual understanding and truth (Calhoun 1996). The theory therefore gives weight to history and culture and is critically engaged in the theorist's own social world and its contribution to the truth.

Similarly, Greene (1994) suggests that if one can enter the lived world of the other, the possibilities of social justice and equality can be realized (Waghid 2005). Moreover, it is necessary that pre-service teachers with a singular reality engage in dialogue so that they may cultivate the ability to image the experience of others, participate in their suffering and extend their empathy to different types of people. The rationale for using Critical Social Theory as a research paradigm is informed by the supposition that despite the democratic ideals of advocating non-racism and non-oppressive practices in a changing society such as South Africa, poverty and social inequality are still rife. This is illustrated by the fact that by 2011, 37.7 percent of the population were living in relative poverty with 2.7 percent of South Africans living on less than R2 a day. While 86.4 percent of all economically active South Africans are employed (Kane-Berman 2012), there are still disparities in income according to race, gender and locations (World Bank 2012).

Poverty, regarded as a human condition characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of resources, capabilities, choices and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, is therefore a key issue for social justice. Pre-service teachers should therefore begin to develop their consciousness in classrooms where cultural or economic experiences differ significantly from their own and gear their teaching toward the development of a 'just' society. In this context, it is highly plausible that diverse groups, through engaging in dialogue and self-reflection can come to a deeper understanding of others and themselves. These processes can engender the principles of social justice and develop critical democracy. Democratic behavior and its attendant attitude necessarily imply that in dialogue with others, one critically reflects on one's own position and through openness, respect for others different from oneself is inevitable (Waghid 2004).

### METHODOLOGY

This carefully planned and crafted study of real-life situations, issues, and problems is culturally responsive, in that it recognizes multiple races, ethnicities and cultures at the center of the research process. The researchers respect-

fully approached this inquiry from a culturally sensitive perspective, acknowledging aspects of each language, culture and gender, including the historical and contemporary experiences of the participants (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Tuhiwai Smith 1999). This paper followed an interpretive qualitative research approach. Data was collected through university online discussion forums and a documentary titled *Miracle Rising, South Africa*, which traces the country's difficult path to freedom, detailing crucial moments during its transition from apartheid to democracy (Fazel 2013), which pre-service teachers had to view for comment. To this end, participants were familiarized with the importance of dialogue, collaborative learning and reflection and could challenge opinions about their belief systems and attitudes. In order to stimulate active critical engagement, they contemplated and answered the following questions: *What are your views about democracy and what feelings emerged as you were watching the documentary? How did you perceive race and oppressive practices evident in the documentary?*

To make a contribution, they had to tender their responses within a certain timeframe. Participants were sourced from the Faculty of Education at a South African university via convenience sampling. In total, 15 pre-service teachers of mixed race and in their third year of study in the B.Ed. course took part in these conversations. The researchers followed Pattmann's (2010) argument that to create value-change, it is absolutely essential to have dialogue in diverse groups. The presumption is that change in a person will occur when they gain knowledge (Calhoun 1996). To this end, the main research question was applied: *How do pre-service teachers perceive democracy and oppressive practices in South Africa toward leading and teaching for social justice in schools?* Through a discourse analysis, pre-service teachers from different cultures, socio-geographical experiences and perspectives, expressed their understanding of democracy, race and oppression in the last 20 years of historical, geographical, political, religious and other legacies that have created injustices in South Africa.

Discourses are integral parts of social imaginaries. They constitute social reality, which renders them epistemologically knowable (Puttergrill and Leildé 2006). As a starting point, dis-

course analytical approaches use the claim of structuralist and poststructuralist linguistic philosophy, and that access to reality is always through language through which one creates representations of reality (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). In his genealogical work, Foucault (1980) developed a theory of power/knowledge, which adheres to the general social constructionist premise that knowledge is not just a reflection of reality and that truth is embedded in power as a productive force constituting discourse, knowledge, bodies and subjectivities (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). The power of discourse is further acknowledged by Burr (1995) who suggests that insofar as discourses form people's identities, they are 'intimately tied' to the structures of practices that are lived out in society from day-to-day and it is in the interest of relatively powerful groups that some discourses and not others receive the stamp of truth.

As an inherent requirement of the course, students were required to part-take in a research study. Consequently, students were expected to sign consent forms. Participants were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially and participant anonymity maintained.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In accordance with this study's theoretical framework, the researchers interpreted what the participants described about their experiences. The information obtained from the participants contributed to current research. The data analysis employed in this paper included data obtained from a university online discussion forum and documentary, which pre-service teachers had to review for comment. The common theme, which emerged from the online discussions, was their preparedness and willingness to recognize the devastating legacy of apartheid and embrace 'new beginnings' with a 'just' frame of mind. For change to occur in the thoughts and actions of pre-service teachers, their awareness of inequalities was explored and their discomfort in instructing and interacting with others whom they perceive as different from themselves exhumed. Such a measure is important because in their professional lives, teachers will encounter a broad spectrum of diversity in their classrooms and schools. One pre-service teacher remarked:

*"As I look back on the past with pain, I actually realize how much our people have overcome. The time has come for us to practice truth and true democracy".*

Pre-service teachers contend that embracing their history, although painful, is a sign of maturity and decisive leadership action. In terms of their experience of differences in schools, they revealed the sentiment that those assigned to the duty of democratic leadership, especially in disadvantaged schools, may be failing to fulfill their responsibility as agents of transformation. In this regard, it may be assumed that the way in which pre-service teachers make sense of their roles as agents of transformation will ultimately affect their decisions and active agency to either engage in classroom pedagogies to combat exclusion and marginalization (Francis and Henson 2007), or to contribute often unconsciously to the perpetuation of racial inequality. One pre-service teacher remarked:

*"Although our country's democracy is no longer a 'new' one, there is still a reason to be optimistic; we have the power to bring about positive change and that is my goal".*

The documentary evoked feelings of sadness, fear and disgust in some, while nine participants felt a sense of despair. Reflecting on their own realities, White pre-service teachers perceive 'Black privilege' as a threat. One teacher commented:

*"Current affirmative action policies, benefiting disadvantaged groups are still unfair practices and I feel marginalized and discriminated against, as employment opportunities in South Africa are reserved for Black people."*

In terms of oppressive practices against Black people in the apartheid era, Black pre-service teachers claim that the privilege experienced by their White counterparts was unjust as the economic gap between Black and White is still visible. White pre-service teachers regard the wrongs of their parents/grandparents not as their fault, and they do not want to be blamed for the past. However, they do not see their current position of privilege as an injustice. Contrary to the previous views expressed, another student remarked as follows:

*"We have a collective responsibility to build this country and as teachers, to build our education system together. Blaming other races will not advance any cause; in fact, it results in more unjust practices being perpetrated - it is a*

*choice to make that difference you want to see in the world”.*

As future teachers, pre-service teachers acknowledge the fact that change is a necessary prerequisite for ‘just’ social interactions in schools and for creating a climate that fosters a sense of belonging to all school community members. One remarked:

*“The documentary was an eye-opener to the past and the future. I learnt that I am part of this legacy of a new democracy and I should engage in anti-oppressive practices, whilst leading learners with dignity and respect”.*

Pre-service teachers are prepared to take on their role in the democracy and are willing to build on democracy, which offers endless opportunities. By eliminating marginalizing conditions, such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation, they feel that they can make a significant contribution. In this regard, another pre-service teacher noted:

*“Yes, let us be taught and enlightened about the past, but there is also no point in sitting there and being stuck in the past; as teachers, our respect for difference should be evident in what we do”.*

It stands to reason that given the issues relating to inequalities in society, such as poverty, economic inequalities, social and linguistic disparities, it is important to consider the cultural diversity in which schools operate and the social justice teaching and leadership role pre-service teachers may advance in these settings. It was interesting to experience the excitement of their sense of ‘enlightenment’ and value-change from their initial trepidation of having to analyze and problematize the social forces that shape their lives.

Democratic practices in South African schools are an elusive concept. Responding to the ever changing needs in education requires flexible leadership practices, and therefore, pre-service teachers preparing to enter the education profession have to be conscious of racial and cultural responsiveness to promote ‘just’ schooling.

Inequalities in schools abound, as learners from disadvantaged schools are less likely to succeed at the same rate of learners from historically White schools. To promote social justice teaching in school and classroom settings encompasses pre-service teachers exemplifying principles of social justice in their new school classroom and in the wider community.

In this study, pre-service teachers demonstrated an increased recognition of the need to maintain an open mind to cross-cultural issues in the classroom. Their capacity for the creation of unbiased, compassionate learning contexts in which they teach was also recognized. Pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of maintaining a respect for diversity, one that is open to different ways of thinking and promotes a collaborative environment in the classroom.

Beane and Apple (2007) contend that social justice is inherently a part of a democratic way of life. The researchers reiterate that democratic citizens value an open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, have faith in their capacity to work collectively to create a better world, use critical reflection to analyze social problems and policies, are always concerned with the welfare of others and work to promote the common good, fight for the rights and dignity of minorities, and create institutions and value systems that support a democratic way of life. For socially just leaders to enact change in schools, leadership preparation programs should provide pre-service leaders with the learning opportunities to develop their awareness, understanding and path for action in an open and explicit dialogue (Vogel 2010).

Discourses interrogating systemic injustice and oppression, democracy and race were explored. From the findings it is clear that cross-cultural dialogues can support social cohesion as a necessary prerequisite to creating a socially just teaching practice. Teacher education programs at both initial and in-service levels should ensure that all pre-service teachers develop appropriate knowledge, attitude and skills to deal effectively with cross-cultural perceptions in South African schools. A dedicated module based on a cross-cultural social justice approach, which challenges social and gender stratification, celebrates human diversity and promotes the provision of equal opportunities should be offered on a first-year level to provide a theoretical knowledge base about social justice teaching. A critical stance frames this discussion: social justice teaching is inextricably linked to sound leadership practices in schools. The need for university courses to integrate social justice into their leadership and management courses and into other disciplines, which pertinently address issues of power and privilege become all important as it may contribute to change in the social role of future teachers.

### CONCLUSION

This paper addressed the value of pre-service teachers' dialogue as advocacy for social justice through teaching and leadership. The researchers sought to inspire cultural dialogue in the context of social justice, focusing on the transformative effects the interactions had for pre-service teachers. In order to investigate the extent to which pre-service teachers are required to lead and teach for social justice in education, their perceptions about democracy, race and oppression were explored. Critics of the dominant approach to teaching on and with difference in pre-service teacher education argue that it mostly promotes decontextualized celebrations of diverse cultures without addressing the critical issues of power and social forces. The challenge for pre-service teachers teaching in diverse learning environments is making learning "culturally responsive" through their teaching practices. Social justice education, which promotes democracy, equity and inclusion, is often absent in the education of future teachers.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that teacher education programs should offer pre-service teachers opportunities for dialogue to question and understand their own conceptions about race, oppression and culture so that they are capacitated to understand diverse learners. Moreover, teacher education should assist pre-service teachers to understand their own racial identity formation and provide the learning space to work with their range of emotions and feelings of indignation that evolve from an exposure to diverse cultures. Isolated offerings of courses on diversity and social justice will not suffice in working to address issues of equity and social justice as in the case of the university depicted in this study. Universities should commit to engaging in a conscious strategy to weave issues of equity and social justice into teacher education programs. Special features of such programs may include a yearlong mentorship initiative, weekly seminars on curriculum issues that allow pre-service teachers to become aware of their own racial identities, building relationships with learners and their families and a compulsory course on race and oppressive practices in education. Pre-service teachers therefore need to

overcome personal biases they may hold about a particular group of learners and ensure that they take leadership in providing a classroom environment that provides support for all learners where everyone is respected and where optimal learning is promoted.

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