Experiences and Tensions in Justice-Oriented Teacher Education

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Dedication:

To Jenna, whose patience and support made this project possible;

And, to Annabel, whose love and joy guides all my work,

My heart to you both.

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates and interprets the experiences of university students participating in a teacher preparation undergraduate major and initial licensure program. The program contains a mission statement focused on developing a “justice-orientation” in its participants. Through qualitative and interpretive research methodology the researcher and the participants examined moments of tension and conflict experienced in program participation.

“You’re always practicing something: you might be practicing what you want, you might be practicing what you don’t want, and you are always changing things. You might be changing in ways that bring you back to the familiar.” adrienne maree brown, *How to Survive the End of the World*

“One of the most exciting things about a poem is that you can live with it for a long time seeing it one way, only to have that view of it cracked open by someone else who alerts you to other layers and possibilities that have been there all along. It’s still the same poem, but leaning into these newly discovered features changes it for you. Maybe that phenomenon is akin to reconnecting to an old friend after some time. They’re still the same person in there, but new characteristics have risen to the surface. At the same time you are meeting your old friend and someone new.” - Tracy K Smith, *The Slowdown*

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Introduction to the Problem, the Research Question

In the fall of 2019, I began working on a project attempting to better understand the experiences of undergraduate students as they participated in a major that was seeking to develop a 'justice orientation' in its graduates. In my first two years of graduate school, I had the opportunity to teach three courses in the elementary education undergraduate major as well as supervising in two different practica across five local elementary schools. The courses that I taught each spoke to some aspect of justice or equity in elementary education contexts, but I wanted to better understand the development of these concepts across the major from the position of the students in the program, especially how their understanding of justice was developed in combination with their experiences in practical elementary education settings. The program area's mission statement sought to center justice in education, I was interested in how this played out in the student experience.

In addition to teaching methods in accordance with state teacher licensing requirements, these courses were meant to discuss the complexities of culture in schools: how schools and schooling are areas where the hegemonizing forces of dominant culture are applied to children and how white, middle-class, protostant values and ways of being often come into conflict with the lived experiences of children. Through this coursework our students were expected to reflect on these cultural forces in schooling and grow some sort of race- and class-consciousness.

This project investigated how our students are taking up these topics; to what extent are they internalizing these discussions and developing some amount of critical consciousness (Seidl & Hancock, 2011). Perhaps most importantly, this project is investigating the extent to which the participants see justice work in education to essential work, at the core of the practice, or optional, additional, secondary work that can be layered atop or insinuated between existing structures and practices. It is my understanding, through my participation as an instructor, supervisor, and graduate student in the program that the 'justice-orientation' described in the mission statement is in line with Tuck and Yang's (2018) description of justice in education:

> This is not a conversation at the margins of a field. Social justice education— whether or not we continue to use those words to define it— is the crux of the future of our field.

> Social justice is not the *other* of the field of education, it is the field. There is no future in the field of education without the contributions of people who are doing their work under the rising sign of social justice. There is no legitimacy to the field of education if it cannot meaningfully attend to social contexts, historical and contemporary structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and antiblackness. Social justice is not the catchall; it is the all. (p. 6)

This project is investigating how much of this understanding translates through to the programs' participants, undergraduate major and licensure students.

Because this project was focused not only on interpreting and articulating the experiences of the participants, but also in actively supporting their continued growth and development along issues of intersectional justice, we attempted to operationalize a theory of critical professional development (Kohli et al., 2015; Seidl & Hancock, 2011; McManimon and Casey, 2018). We conceived of this project as both research which provides further or deeper understanding into the developing practice of new teachers with concerns for social justice, and also as an active agent in shaping that practice, a location where community support and peer accountability would push the practice. Operating under the assumption that the participating teachers were in various stages of developing as informed, political actors—developing critical consciousness (Friere, 2018/1968)—who are themselves developing in response to struggles they are experiencing in their coursework or placements, we attempted to employ dialogic, problem solving practices, and allowed thinking about professional development structures aimed at "sustaining ongoing work to combat structural racism"(McManimon and Casey, 2018).

This project sought to better understand the experiences of participants in these programs as they 1) deepened their understanding of the potential meanings of justice in school contexts; 2) situated themselves within the contingent, shifting nature of intersectional identity and cultural competency; and 3) located a justice-orientation at the center of their pedagogical practice. This project looked at how participating in coursework caused/encouraged the participants to develop an evolving consciousness of themselves as raced- or classed-persons, among other intersectional identities; how this evolving consciousness influenced their thinking about the practice of teaching and learning, especially around

concepts of 'success' in schools and how intersectional identities contributed variously to how success is constructed in school spaces; and how these lines of thought and development have shifted/continued/changed as the participants moved from university classroom spaces, to elementary school practicum spaces, to elementary school student teaching spaces.

This project was concerned with expanding/examining what is meant by a 'justice-orientation' and what role a well-intentioned teacher can play to enact a justice-oriented practice inside an education system dominated by competition and neoliberalism; did the participants feel they were at an inflection point, a point at which educational justice was possible, or where justice reforms are impossible or meaningless inside established systems? Are these participants able to base their teaching practice in a justice orientation, or do they struggle to layer a justice-oriented practice atop otherwise oppressive school structure? The findings of this project have potential to influence how we enter into discussion of justice and identity in undergraduate coursework, as well as offer suggestions for how to support new and novice teachers as they begin their practice with elementary students.

Positionality and Commitments

I am a cis-gendered, white man attending graduate school in elementary education at a major, midwestern university. I have been working in elementary spaces since 2007. The work of this project reflects my commitment to supporting teachers in the pursuit of a more humane pedagogy. I understand my role as an education researcher to be in support of teacher development and professionalization, not in the service of a whiteness project or neoliberalism, but in service of a more culturally connected and supportive classroom experience for children. I recognize that the best teaching is grounded in humility, creativity, and relationships. Much of this project, while proposed by me, is the product of discussion and collaboration with my participants. As much as possible, this project sought to support teachers in taking an active position in decentering whiteness and dominant culture in classrooms; we relied on the writings and experiences of scholars of color, popular texts, and my (and my participants') experiences to trouble and expand our understanding of the culture of classrooms. The citational record of this project is purposefully a combination of foundational, canonical texts and texts that are written for a popular audience, texts that

draw more closely from the lived experiences of their authors, and texts that focus our attention on the activist possibilities for educators. The use of popular texts on topics of race, whiteness, feminism, and school discipline allowed for accessible shared readings with the participants.

Methodology

This project employed critical ethnographic methods (Madison, 2019) and the interviews were guided by discussions of power and hierarchy, informed by arts-based narrative inquiry (Leavy, 2009; Denzin, 2003) and post-intentional phenomenological reflection (Vagle, 2012). This project sought to investigate the experiences of the participants through "methodological bricolage" (Denzin, 2000) and shifted through interview, narrative analysis, reflection and self-study wherever the participants and I needed.

This project consisted of a series of one-on-one interviews between myself and the participants. There were a total of seven participants who spoke with me in seventeen, approximately one-hour interviews. All the interviews were conducted in the 19-20 academic year, with all interviews before March, 2020 conducted in person and interviews after March, 2020 conducted via Zoom and recorded. The interviews followed an open-ended script of questions focusing on the participant's experiences in university coursework and their experiences working and observing in elementary schools for their practica and student teaching. Because of the variations in coursework and elementary practica and student-teaching sites, the participants described a very wide range of experiences.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each separate interview was evaluated through a field note (Emerson, 1995) which was written on the conversation directly afterwards and the whole corpus of interviews was analyzed through post-reflection journaling (Vagle, 2018). The fieldnotes and transcripts were not individually coded, but emergent themes were identified and used to develop questions for subsequent interviews and played a role in the continued reflective analysis. While this project does not purport to be a phenomenological study *per se*, phenomenological research practices were used to encourage an analysis that highlighted contingency, change, and the shifting relationships between interviewer, interviewee and the material. Individual conversations were analyzed to craft new, follow-up questions for subsequent interviews and interviews with other participants (Vagle, 2018). In this way the

issues discussed and the questions asked in the interviews grew together across the study. I shared this process and much of my initial finding with my participants and attempted to foster (in myself and my interlocutors) "genuine curiosity, sincere interest, and the courage to be 'vulnerable'" (Madison, 2019, p. 49).

In seeking to define a 'justice-oriented' practice, this project solicited narratives from the participants of moments that felt particularly salient to them in regards to the interconnections between culture, cultural groups, power and education. The accounts and analyses recounted here are critical ethnography in that they "aim to engage, interpret, and record social meaning, values, and embodiments… [and are] particularly concerned with how humans actions and experiences are generated" (Madison, 2019, p. 3) by the participants in the social context of teaching and learning. The accounts are not verbatim. They have been constructed, and reconstructed, by the researcher and the participants themselves. The quotations from the participants are not attributed to single individuals; they reflect shared thematic engagement across interviews. This is in an attempt to "collaboratively access participants' life experiences and engage in a process of storying and restorying in order to reveal multidimensional meanings and present an authentic and compelling rendering of the data" (Leavy, 2009, p. 27). These storying efforts are not fictionalizations, but rather they are attempts to 'regenre' the interviews into linear accounts that capture the speaker's intent. The considerations that went into the narrativization process provided additional data for analysis and commentary. Where possible the notes and narratives were shared with the participants for member checking and agreement.

Participant Descriptions

All of my interlocutors were white women, between the ages of 19 and 22. They were all from the Midwest and had attended public schools in the region before attending university. Their families represent a fairly narrow socio-economic band in the upper-middle range of household incomes. All participants were current or recent members of a justice-oriented elementary education foundations major at a large Midwestern University. Two of the participants had recently graduated and were completing their masters in education and initial teacher's license during the time of our interviews. Several of the participants were

completing double majors or concentrations in addition to their work in elementary education.

All of the participants had worked with me previously in some capacity. For many of the participants I was their instructor in one or more courses as well as supervising them through a practicum. None of the participants were enrolled in my course nor were they my supervisees during the length of this project. The courses I taught placed particular emphasis on the interconnections between education and race, class, and gender, and our shared history discussing these topics may account for some of their willingness to grapple with these particular issues in our conversations. Because of my experiences teaching across many settings in the major, I was able to "get close and to participate in a wide cross-section of their everyday activities over an extended period of time" (Emerson, 1995, p. 14).

Contexts for Justice-Orientation

The interviews for this project are full of misunderstandings, re-starts, and struggles to clarify a point or define a phrase; very much like Tuck and Yang describe:

> there are vexed terms all over the place (justice itself included). We are sorting between many goals which could have animated this discussion, including goals of complete and total coherence (impossible) and goals of complete clarity and consistency (boring). We use the words we can, even when they disappoint or obscure. Sometimes, it is good just to say, "I feel what you are trying to say with those words and it does not matter that I use those words with a different meaning. (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p. 2)

Participants struggled with philosophical, political, and pedagogical notions of justice; whether it was additional or essential, optional or required; whether it could be managed under current school systems; and if a generational change was needed in the teacher corps. A justice-orientation felt particularly at odds with the "normal ways to measure success or failure" (personal communication) in elementary classrooms. Participants often mentioned their "school's program or curriculum" and their difficulties diverging from or adding to the materials, tests, plans, and norms provided.

Conversations with participants around what they felt a 'justice-orientation' meant in their contexts (coursework, practica, student teaching) produced many divergent definitions. Often, participan

ts grounded their discussions in specific course inputs to help them disambiguate justice in a general sense from justice in a specific elementary education context. For many participants it seemed important to them to give a definition of justice that had a specific, educational application from an education authority or researcher. The most explicitly referenced theories of justice in education were culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), education applications of students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992), and education for liberation or for the development of critical consciousness (hooks, 1994: Friere, 2018). The references to these works were in discussions of individual lessons or classroom activities, isolated instances of teachable justice work with students. Justice work was treated like a subject area that could be addressed in isolation, or as an optional add-on to an existing subject area. Participants spoke of "doing a more justice focused science lesson" or of "teaching social studies in a way that the kids actually cared about". There was a sense in the conversations that a teacher's pedagogy could slide in and out of a justice-orientation across a school day, week, or year. Based on their experiences in elementary classrooms they described "adding read alouds that showed kids representations of themselves"as the most tangible expression of justice-oriented teaching, but they seldom had opportunities to influence any curricular decisions in their placements, and didn't report any significant efforts on the part of their cooperating teachers (CT's) to do so.

In discussion of their university coursework and where they were drawing their understandings of educational justice from, several participants mentioned specific articles that were assigned as part of course readings, but also mentioned the difficulty of always completing the entirety of their course readings and "often skimming for the jist" of important articles. There was no mention of justice work being collaborative (neither teacher-student collaborations, teacher-teacher collaborations, nor teacher-parent collaborations) and only one participant had any discussion of forming relationships with the parents of her students. There was a prevalent attitude that this work lived in individual teachers planning and dispositional work.

The strongest individual connection or specific example of developing a consciousness of the role identity plays in schooling that participants made through their coursework experiences involved their thinking from a cultural identity exercise that they did in an introduction to teaching class adapted from an

exercise called Circles of My Multicultural Self (Teaching Tolerance, 2020). In this activity the students reflect on the various 'mirco-cultures' that intersect to form their self-identity, and how those micro-cultures can take shape and prominence in their self-identity and self-expressions differently in different contexts. The participants spoke of this activity as significant in helping them understand that people with different identities could have different relationships or reactions to shared experiences; that school experiences could result in different reactions for different students.

It is significant that the participants came back to this exercise in that 1) it focuses on self-reflection and the seeing or not seeing of difference, and 2) it highlights the salience of difference without discussing the role of power and hierarchy in the expression of these contingent identities. Students reflect on their intersectional identities across social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, language, religion, exceptionality, age, and geography. Participants discussed how different individuals experience school and the dominant culture differently, and how these differences are supported or not by schools. They concluded from this activity that there was a need for an appreciation for "diversity and respecting all students and their backgrounds," and also a need to "find content for lessons that holds up a mirror for students to see themselves."

While there were statements about being "social-class aware" and focusing on "anti-racism in classroom practice and behavior management" there was no call for significant restructuring along anti-capitalist, anti-racist, or anti-hierachical lines. Participants discussed doing justice work inside the constraints of curriculum and testing structures, caveating their position with concerns about "meeting standards;" staying "developmentally appropriate;" and described a general sense of uncertainty about their ability to instruct on basic skills with statements like, "what if I teach something wrong and this kid like doesn't know proper alphabet because I taught him something wrong or didn't teach this like, like, good enough or something."

Critical Whiteness Studies

Conversations with participants addressed topics considered through critical whiteness studies frameworks: race-evasiveness (Seidl & Hancock, 2011), privilege frameworks (McIntosh, 2008; and

Lensmire et al., 2013) and the dominant structuring force of "whiteness as invisible normativity" (Jupp et al., 2016, p. 1159). Following Jupp et al. (2016), participants in this project were seeking to "address, describe, or critically confront historically institutionalized racial inequalities, racism, and whiteness in preparing White teachers for work in increasingly diverse schools" (p. 1152).

All members of this research project, myself included, are white identifying teachers. This project investigated the participants' racial identities using a critical whiteness studies framework (Roediger, 1991/2007; Watson, 2013; Thandeka, 1999; Lensmire, 2017).

Emphasising that teaching work is deeply relational, participants were encouraged to treat research sessions as affinity spaces for them to explore how race influences/shapes interactions and relationships with students and institutions. Building off of W.E.B Du Bois's (1903) concept of racial double consciousness, this project attempted to articulate how white teachers develop a sense of themselves as raced, develop a consciousness (Seidl & Hancock, 2011; Sider, 2019) of the influence race has on their practice and relationships with educational institutions and their students. We attempted to highlight and explore tensions, shames, and hesitations in confronting oppressive practice and real/perceived barriers to just action (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019; Bonilla-Silva, 2002).

Feminism

In discussing their motivations towards the teaching profession, the participants named reasons like "enjoying time with children" or "wanting to provide a welcoming environment for kids;" they felt drawn to the relational, caring aspects of the profession. To better examine their various identities vis-a-vis a caring profession, this study draws from feminist literature on women and teaching (Grumet, 1988; hooks 1994), the particular tensions of being a raced woman (Frankenburg, 1993; Nash, 2019), and necessity of understanding the cross-links between race, class, and gender as an activist, justice-oriented teacher (Ahmed, 2017; Kendall, 2020; Carruthers, 2019).

This project envisioned teaching as both a collective, human practice, and a system structurally in support of oppressive practice; as both a fundamentally feminst pursuit and an articulation of patriarchal hierarchy. Through the use of feminist theory we discussed and imagined a justice-orientation centered on the human; extending Mikki Kendall's (2020), "No woman has to be respectable to be valuable" into

schools to say, no child has to be compliant to be seen as fully human.

Through participation in this study, participants examined and reflected on the possibility of solidarity with families and other care-givers across race and class divisions. We asked how race and class influence our relational understandings of 'giving care' to students and caring for other people's children. How do our intersectional identities compound the challenge of forming and living in a collective movement?

Analysis of Data

In this section I will highlight and analyze comments and stories from participants that demonstrate the participant's developing understanding of educational justice and their difficulty in centering a justice orientation in their teaching practice. Paying attention to Apple (1990), we will examine how their expectations of 'normalcy', their position in hierarchies, their 'commonsense' understandings of achievement in classroom space and classroom/school structures impair or inhibit their ability to place justice, even their own understandings of justice, at the center of their relationships with students. This analysis assumes that status quo supporting normalcy works in the service of power, specifically of white supremacy, and that "the default of our current system is the reproduction of racial inequality; our institutions were designed to reproduce racial inequality and they do so with efficiency" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 153).

All of the participants in this project described themselves as some version of a "social justice oriented" teacher or insisted that they "cared about justice and equity" in schools, yet in nearly all of the interviews participants were quick to describe problems that they anticipated in their teaching or problems that they had observed in their practica that they feared would pertain to their future teaching situations. In the analysis of our interviews and discussions on the participants' narratives, we were able to observe several themes regarding caveats or barriers to justice-oriented practices in participants' teaching or their understanding of what a justice-oriented practice could look like for them. Participants discussed classroom situations that demonstrated the hegemonic force of whiteness at play in schools, the distribution of "the kinds of normative and dispositional elements required to make this inequality seem natural"

(Apple, 1990, p/ 43). They described a sort of gravity that seemed to emanate from status quo supporting practices, pulling practice away from what they felt was more just, more equitable, but more difficult to actualize.

Much of the discussion in our interviews was spent on unpacking the participants' understanding of the systems and structures involved in "school reform" and "school improvement plans" and how teachers had to position themselves in alignment with, or in opposition to, these systems. Participants demonstrated an understanding of justice work in schools to be "a politics thing, and more liberal schools or areas are doing a better job… I'm glad that [our licensure program] is doing so much work for justice in schools." This sentiment, demonstrated how many associate justice work with 'good people' and 'progressive thinking' and that there is a linear path of racial progres, evocative of Patel (2018): "ideas of justice in education, and more broadly, in society, are deeply connected to the metonymies of linearity. Linearity is the governing belief that not only is there a straight line between two points, but that this is the best, and solely valid, line (p. 106)." Participants described differences they experienced between "an older generation of teachers" and people that had received their licenses more recently.

Participants struggled to identify and articulate the complex set of racist and anti-racist systems and behaviors that they observed in schools, very much demonstrating the misunderstandings of racial progress described by Kendi (2019):

> Incorrect conceptions of race as a social construct (as opposed to a power construct), of racial history as a singular march of racial progress (as opposed to a dual of antiracist and racist progress), of the race problem as rooted in ignorance and hate (as opposed to powerful self-interest)—all come together to produce solutions bound to fail. (p. 201-202)

This illusion of progress—that schools, parents, districts, credentialing programs are working together to improve schools in a just manner—hinder new and novice teachers in their understanding of a just classroom. This section will focus on two examples, themes, from the interview conversations that demonstrate the complex intermingling of oppressive and just practices and the daily tensions of attempting a just teaching practice in the midst of oppressive cultures and systems; of trying to build a justice canoe

while paddling some oppressive rapids. The two themes highlighted here that decenter justice are 1) conflict between normality and novelty in elementary classrooms, 2) programmatic confusion inside the teacher education program. These two themes combine in the experiences of the participants to simultaneously highlight and draw attention to oppressive systems in schooling while also decentering justice-oriented, anti-oppressive practices as optional, extra, or contingent.

Conflicted Expectations And Desires (Practicing Justice V. Practicing Normal)

Participants often demonstrated both their developing consciousness of the need for justice in classrooms and simultaneously their conflicted feelings about what shape that could or should take. It usually began when discussing their personal motivations for becoming teachers and their thoughts on the purpose or goals of elementary education. In describing their desire to become a teacher, participants made the statements to the effect of "I mostly just like working with kids." They would express an enjoyment for working with children, and a desire to like the children they will work with. One went on,

> I feel like a lot of the reason people join this major is because people tell them that they're good at working with kids. And I feel like maybe sometimes men especially don't get that as much. Like don't get that compliment because it's not like traditionally a masculine role to be good with kids.

These sentiments jump out as significant because they lie at the crux of so many cultural systems and values. The participants invariably discussed the degree to which teaching is a care-giving profession, human and relational. But this is put into immediate conflict. The goals of school are not necessarily in line with "the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human" (Friere, 2018, p. 55), but rather some curricular, district, or state goals. These goals have been developed through an understanding of 'development' and 'progress' that link growth with values of race, gender, and nationalism (Lesko, 2001) and through pushing 'grit' and 'hard work' have nearly as much to do with "providing a work ethos and character building" (Grumet, 1988, p. 39) as schools did in 1850. The hope for a justice-oriented teaching practice in the face of curricula, tracking, pacing guides, and exclusionary discipline results in participants asking questions such as "but what should I even be teaching them?"

The fact of a care-giving profession with visible inequality and race/class/gender disparities in achievement, engagement, and joy indicate a problem, allowing us to see "justice as intertwined with injustice, ironically doing the labor of injustice, open[ing] a space to apprehend this unseemly relationship" (Patel 2018, p. 102). The efforts to get to know children, to 'build classroom community' ultimately serve to push kids 'back on track', or as a participant put it, "we do community circle time. Mostly my CT is just trying to get the kids under control so she can get through her lessons." These efforts to be in community with children for the service of a curricular program are emblematic of a profession that puts teachers, largely young women, to work in service of meeting the state's goals and needs:

> The contradictions implicit in this image of the ideal woman and the ideal mother were extended into the training and work of the ideal teacher. The intimacy, spirituality, and innocence that teachers and students were to inherit from the mother/child bond—the prototype of their relationship—collapsed into strategies for control. (Grumet, 1988, p. 43)

The struggle for how to be in the classroom with children is best demonstrated through the participant's description of moments when they attempted, or noticed an opportunity, to teach in a more just manner, but failed or failed to try because of a complication. A situation involving two Black students which was recounted by a participant who is self-decribed as "feminist to the bones" shows the difficulty of navigating structural and personal barriers in reimagining a just teaching practice:

> These two girls they're very smart and they really like to be leaders, like people would call them bossy… and I'm trying to figure out how to let them be leaders in the classroom without, I guess not 'know their role' because I want them to be leaders in the classroom, I just want them not to see that leadership in the classroom as a superiority over kids who like might need more help in the classroom, you know, so that's kind of what I'm struggling with. Because I don't want to reprimand them for being good leaders because they are, one girl was trying to show by example the other day and I was really appreciative of it but she was also like, doing the thing where she was just yelling, "No!"

The participant has identified a cultural conflict, a moment where these students are trying to act in a

manner that runs counter to some narrative of dominant culture. She does not want the students to be seen as "bossy" or "bitchy" but rather as "leaderly." She is looking for more than simple compliance from her students. She wants to figure out how she can adjust her teaching to allow these students to practice and demonstrate leadership, challenging a gendered stereotype, but at the same time is struggling to reconceptualize what a non-hierarchical model of leadership even looks like. She is confronted in several ways: does the structure of the curriculum allow for authentic student-to-student collaboration where leadership and organization skills could actually be valued? Is there room for positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1991) in the lesson structure, or is there an expectation of individual achievement baked into the class's systems? Where could she look for a model of non-hierarchical leadership, not only in a schooling context, but in a societal context? The participant was able to identify an area of injustice, the gendered repression of these students' behaviors, but truly struggled to find a path out of it.

For this participant, the structures and policies of the school and curriculum limited her ability to engage authentically with the needs of the students in a direct, just manner. Ultimately she felt more answerable to the established structures then she was to the needs of the students. She was encouraged by the structures and policies to revert to 'normal' practice. These policies seemed neutral on their face, applying to all students; as the participant described, "that was just how the lessons were designed for everyone." But zooming out, we can see how the "educational and cultural policies, and the vision of how communities should operate and who should have power in them, served as mechanisms of social control" (Apple, 1990/1979, p. 63). We can see the facility with which a well-intentioned teacher in training reverts to practicing 'normal,' to the disservice of young, black girls, despite her awareness of the issues at play.

If we, as Graue (2010), "consider teaching as an ethical act, our actions are not just pedagogical, they are moral. As such they should recognize our historical positioning and address responses in a particular trajectory for specific ends" (Graue, 2010, p. 106). In abandoning her attempt to support these young girls in leadership roles, this participant felt the moral injury (Haight et al., 2016) of compromising her values.

This theme was developed across many conversations with the participants. This tension between wanting to practice a new pedagogy with students, one focused on their human-ness, and the defaulting to

an inauthentic, oppressive pedagogy showed up again and again. What was of the most interest to the participants was how through our conversations we were able to identify that the pressure to default was originating both externally in school structures and internally, in the participants' own expectations and imaginations of what school 'should' look like. I take this complicated tension to reflect both a growing awareness of 'race consciousness' (Jupp & Slattery, 2010) and simultaneously a failure to interpret and resist how the oppressive structures of the classroom "context attends (or perhaps more aptly, does not attend) to the curricular needs of its students" (Berchini, 2016, p. 1030).

For the purposes of getting through coursework, maintaining grades and their status as high-achievers, it was easier for participants to opt for staying quiet in their practica and following the lead of their cooperating teachers (CT's); to complete their lesson plans, read alouds and assessments within established oppressive frameworks; to be friendly with their CT's and to not bring up disagreements especially about the discipline practices used on Black children. With rare exceptions, they found their work to be easier the more they compromised.

When asked about a particular experience with a cooperating teacher who was disproportionately punishing her Black students for 'disrupting lessons' the participant described their feeling that "there isn't anything I can do there. I just stay out the way and bring my notes back to [the teacher education course] and vent about it there." She was experiencing a pull to practice "white racial bonding" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 44)—to laugh it off with her cooperating teacher; to build a sense of comfort, unity within the system; and ultimately participate in pathologizing children, especially Black children as a threat to a stable learning community; "a discourse ostensibly about threat or danger was in fact a rationale for repression or control" (Frankenburg, 1993, p. 61). The participant seemed encouraged by the cooperating teacher and the school's established discipline policy to blame the student, not the curricula, lesson, or relationship, scapegoating them for not 'getting with the program' and to rely on this impression of the student to sooth the tension of obviously biased events:

> In other words, as white people, we need stereotypes of people of color to give us relief from the strain of participating in and benefitting from a society that at every moment disregards a founding principle—that all people are created equal. Racial stereotypes

> enable us to continue believing in democracy even as we betray it. At the core of white racial identities, then, is a dilemma, a conflict, and ambivalence—a belief in and desire in America, poised against evidence, all around us, of massive inequality. (Lensmire, 2017, p. 16)

Programmatic Confusion Inside The Teacher Education Program

For most of the participants, this theme was discussed in terms of "wanting to do something different, but not knowing what [they] were able or allowed to do." For many of the participants, they made connections back to their university coursework and described confusion that arose from inside their program, naming feelings of their program "having its wires crossed" around issues of lesson design, inclusion, family involvement/connection, and testing. Most often participants spoke about their confusion regarding discipline and management strategies promoted or described in their various teacher education classes and how those inputs didn't provide them with the tools they needed to interpret or evaluate the discipline and management systems they were observing in their elementary classrooms. Their experiences learning about classroom- and behavior-management in their university coursework left each of them with confusion about the goals of classroom management and a desire to "do a better job in [their] own classrooms in the future."

The participants were in agreement that their coursework had provided them with the information they needed to identify various classroom management programs in schools (Restorative Justice practices, Responsive Classroom, Assertive Discipline, Positive Behavior Interventions, etc), but that their understandings of the values of various systems was confused by contradictory inputs from their coursework; the different teacher education courses were "saying different things." The participants noted and appreciated that "in courses [they] were able to make our own minds up about stuff, like be critical and investigate different management styles," but they expressed that the open-ended critical reflection provided by some courses was undermined by the best-practice prescriptions of others.

As students in their teacher training program, they were introduced to the idea that the structures of school have traditionally been in support of some dominant cultural group, namely gendered and classist support of white supremacy; "whose cultural capital, both overt and covert, is placed 'within' the school

curriculum? Whose vision of economic, racial, and sexual reality, whose principles of economic reality, whose principles of social justice, are embedded in the content of schooling?" (Apple, 1990, p. 157). To some extent they assume that this is a settled matter of historical fact and that there is a shared understanding that their teacher training program is working to combat this and feel frustrated when their various classes promote different or conflicting notions of justice/ethics/efficiency/normality/best-practice.

Participants struggled to see their program itself as existing within the "systems of oppression" that are shaping school practices and that various university policies, state credentialing requirements, and course and departmental structures could be participating on both sides of the "dual of antiracist and racist progress" (Kendi, 2019, p. 201); that portions of their coursework were in direct support of the oppressive practices that were being highlighted elsewhere. As one participant described it in reference to a discussion of schoolwide positive behavior intervention systems (PBIS):

> The course was preaching about looking at the circumstances surrounding students' behavior, and was advocating using PBIS because it was positive and looking at individual student needs. But in a conversation with a classmate, they were talking about PBIS being based in behaviorism and eugenics and was focused on making kids act 'normal' in the classroom. But the course instructor wasn't engaging with that at all.

This conflicted understanding is compounded when the participants are taking part in these systems in their assigned practica and student teaching placements. They come into these situations equipped with the knowledge that their site likely uses behavior systems that are not in line with their personal values, they are instructed to participate and observe in these systems, and are subjected to the moral injury (Haight et al., 2016) of supporting and implementing practices they believe to be harmful to students. Their feelings of harm and conflict come from all around: their coursework is demanding certain behaviors; their desires to do well and develop positive relationships with their professors and cooperating teachers "rewarded [them] with social capital such as being seen as fun, cooperative, and a team player" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 58), and their failure to show up for their students in the manner they desire "[brings] on a loss of self-respect. But behind this moral failure was a more original fear: exile" (Thandeka, 1999, p. 9). And at every step there is the lure of forgetting to focus on systems of oppression and to pathologize the behavior of a child; to say to

one's self, "my professor said that [such and such system] was good for students" and to locate a problem within the child, and to extrapolate from that pathology some blame pointed at family, class or race, identifying some fault in 'these kids'; producing "historical and environmental explanations for Black oppression [which] could easily be conflated with 'racial' ones" (Roediger, 1991, p. 36).

Ultimately, the participants discussed how "the program is focused on justice and equity, but it also has to meet all the requirements for teaching us like lesson planning and management" and for much of the coursework it was easier to go with the flow in classroom spaces, to observe and note for the possibility of "doing it better in my own class." The participants were simultaneously practicing the new, justice-oriented, critical thinking the program envisioned, and also practicing operating within bounds, not making waves, not pushing back against authority, not asking questions. They come away unsatisfied and often upset by their own behaviors and their difficulty in meaningfully reconciling their course-inputs with their practical experiences, demonstrating the feeling that "the internal price exacted from [them] for [their] ongoing membership in the "white" race was psychic tension and discomfort" (Thandeka, 1999. p. 8).

Conclusions and Implications

Through analysis of the interview transcripts, we observe both internal and external forces decentering a justice orientation in education work for the participants. We observe the internal, the effort to develop or maintain a certain self-identity, a certain type of status or relationship; and the external, moments or structures within the systems of their coursework which have failed to support them in actually doing the work they desire, or where conflicts within their institution resolve in their minds as confusion or frustration.

Identity Preservation

When the participants speak of tense moments, these times when they observe a disconnect between their values, their courses, their politics and their actions—"we do our Responsive Classroom morning meeting every day. We do community circle time. But right after my CT is like already yelling at kids and sending kids to take a break," or, "the wires were tangled between the El Ed and SPED majors

when it comes to school-wide PBIS")—we see them struggling through the "culture of shame" (Thandeka, 1999, p. 18) they feel from their desire to break from the status quo (disappointing their CT, supervisor, boss or principal), and their failure to do so (disappointing themselves, their students, their politics). They feel caught between the feelings of success and acceptance they receive from adults and peers when they work in support of systems in opposition to the needs of students and the earnest desire to behave in a more humane manner towards children. This concern is discussed in nearly every interview:

> Also, it's hard not to like, fall back into what you have learned in the past of how you were taught, and be like, 'Well, my teacher taught me this way. So I'm going to teach that way too.' I'm, I worry about falling back into that or falling into how I think teachers have thought in the past, and sometimes I was just like, very frustrated. When [the same kids] disrupt the lessons I get in such a mindset where I was like, I just want to yell at [them]. And I don't *want* to yell at them. But it's that inner monologue of like, like if I was like my teacher at this grade, like I would yell at these kids. But if I wanted to be a better teacher than that I would do something else. But at the same time you still have to hold them accountable, even maybe even more accountable, because you don't want to let them down. So if you ease up on your expectations, because they're students of color, or because there's something going on, that's a disservice. Right? (personal communication)

They can feel it, just below the surface—defaulting to scapegoating and pathologizing offers a way to maintain a sense of self, a certain social status. There is always a temptation to trade personal frustration and failure for an authoritarian discipline or exclusionary practice in line with oppressive systems; to preserve your self-identity as a caring, successful woman at the expense of the child, to live out "the moralistic and impossible demand that women, without expressing anger or aggression, control children who were resisting a tightly repressive and tedious regime encouraged teachers to confuse the logical consequences of these harsh conditions for the failure of their own discipline, intelligence, and inspiration" (Grumet, 1988, p. 52).

Their experience developed a sense that a 'justice-orientation' in teaching is possible and needed,

but that they were on their own to develop and implement it whenever they were hired into their own classrooms. They felt the friction of going against the common practices, and didn't have any notion of how to continue to work meaningfully for students, with families, and across classrooms. Their understanding of justice in teaching was limited to individual lessons and they had no practice pushing back against administration, school culture, or practices they viewed as harmful. This led to many the participants feeling a crisis of conscience and frustration with both the elementary schools they were placed in and the teacher training program they were members of. We discussed these feelings and felt that they indicated a need for more structured support for new and novice teachers. They discussed the need for continued support to help them work through the real situation they were to find themselves in over the course of their first few years in the classroom.

Teacher Education and Decentering Justice

> "What are you practicing? (Include ***anything*** you practice/repeat in your life, things you feel positive about, things you feel negative about…) We spend our lives in unconscious practices, practices that make us deny our true selves, our true power, our collectivism… What do you need to practice?" (Brown, 2017, p. 188)

In her podcast, *The Slowdown,* former U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith spoke about having her understanding of a familiar poem "cracked open" by listening to another's description of it. She spoke of how the unfamiliar and comfortable can be made to seem to seem new, strange, even dangerous when reinterpreted by another. I listen to her podcast daily, but this statement, this line, struck me as I was thinking through my data with my participants. It revealed a mistake in my thinking as I engaged in this project. I was mistaken in my thinking about the degree to which the students in my program, participants in my project, were familiar, conscious, metacognitive about the relationships between culture and practice in schools. For this group of participants, individual aspects of whiteness and cultural oppressions had been made explicit, but the mesh of oppressive systems supporting oppressive systems remained out of reach during the project.

I had assumed that students would be reevaluating something they knew well, seeing it to have

new features and detail that had gone unnoticed. Instead, students were seeing something for the first time, developing lopsided and halting understandings. They were having their attention drawn to certain features, certain practices, but they were not forming consistent understandings. They were left thinking that issues of oppression were real and that they were embedded into the everyday structures of schooling, but they didn't have a sense of what it would mean to move away from those structures. They were developing some facility with identifying individual moments they could name as racist, classist, or sexist, but they remained largely unthinking regarding the pervasive social forces harming the community inside schools: "[Social] forces include the ideology of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighborhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 8). Their thinking remained on their immediate locus, their disposition, their attitudes, their relationships, but largely remained indifferent to, or unaware of, the macro-level oppressive systems they were supporting in their practica and student teaching classrooms. When required by assignments or with the direct support of a supervisor, they were willing to discuss issues of raced- or gendered-oppression with their collaborating teachers, and occasionally there were chances to engage with students around issues of race or class (primarily though read-alouds), but there was still an overarching, if somewhat reluctant, support of exclusionary discipline that disproportionately targeted students of color, and a general deficit lens on communities and families of color.

Further, I was surprised with their difficulty in imagining a way out of the limitations of their coursework or their curricula. Normalcy carried more weight in our conversations than I expected. It was a challenge for them to set aside such commonplace classroom features as leveled groups, skill-focused lessons, behavior trackers, or body monitoring and control. I underappreciated the degree to which,

> hegemony acts to 'saturate' our very consciousness, so that the educational, economic and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it, becomes the world *tout court*, the only world. Hence, hegemony refers not to congeries of meaning that reside in at an abstract level somewhere at the 'roof of our

> brain.' Rather, it refers to an organized assemblage of meaning and practices, the central, effective and dominant system of meanings, values and actions which are *lived*" (Apple, 1990, p. 5),

And that their experience in school created an impression of how school *should* be, even in the face of the inputs they were receiving from their coursework and our conversations.

Most meaningful was the discovery that the tensions and confusions felt in classroom spaces were exacerbated in some cases by their experiences across their program coursework. The participants often commented that some fundamental portions of their teacher education, like lesson planning, management, assessment, and community outreach, were treated very differently across their courses; some courses allowed significant critical engagement and observation while others were prescriptive and focused on best practices. These inconsistencies seemed to encourage the participants to pick and choose the practices that seemed most effective in their individual situations, largely causing a reversion to whatever systems were provided or supported in their cooperating classroom. There was a distinct concern about the lack of exemplars among the cooperating teachers; few or no real examples of what teaching in a just, liberatory manner could look like.

The programmatic concerns were compounded by a difficult paradox. The mission statement for the program is attempting to center a justice-orientation in its participants, and while there are many courses that do highlight and explore issues of justice in education, the core of the program is the state licensing requirements for teachers. There are course inputs about power, race, class, gender and sexuality, but they are often housed in separate spaces, required for the major, yes, but separate. There is a cultivated sense that issues of justice are more important for some students than others, that this is an urban issue, or that the topic is important, but optional. The very classes that are doing the most work to highlight and educate on the influences of culture in teaching are the same classes that are decentering justice work; they are the courses providing additional information alongside the 'real work' of learning to teach.

Participants understand schools as a raced and classed space, moved past race-evasiveness, were educated out of the "astonishing ignorance (Myrdal, 1944, p. 48)" of white, midwestern moderates, but have remained focused on the personal, have limited understandings of oppressive systems of power, and

are reluctant to push back against school structures and their own expectations for normalcy in classrooms.

The findings of this project have potential to influence how we enter into discussion of justice and identity in undergraduate coursework, as well as offer suggestions for how to support new and novice teachers as they begin their practice with elementary students.

Coda: Covid-19 and the pursuit of racial justice (181 days of social distancing, and counting)

"What falls away, what stays central?"

I conducted most of the interviews for this project before the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were fully felt in this area. I had to make significant adjustments to the project at nearly all levels, most significantly I had to eliminate the bulk of the meetings that I had planned. I was unable to conduct any of the group sessions that I originally proposed and had to make do with zoom conversations and re-analysis of previous conversations. My conclusions feel a little sweeping for the amount of data that I presented. I limited this paper to a couple of themes among many observed; my conclusions may reflect more on the entire project than on just these two themes.

I did not include any data from conversations about covid or the Movement for Black Lives. I am too close to this summer's protests and rallies for racial equality and police abolition to reflect on them in an academic manner, but I felt I had to add a few notes from conversations directly relating to this project:

In the zoom interviews that I was able to have after the semester was shut down, I was always sure to discuss how the participant's coursework had changed due to the move to online instruction. The responses were largely positive and further highlighted my initial findings. Course instructors did a laudable job of assisting students through the essential portions of their syllabi, but 'essential' was defined by state requirements rather than calls for justice; discussion of justice, equity, diversity and representation dropped away in any classes that didn't have that specific aim in the course description; the already minimal contact that students had with families fell to zero. The courses made sure to fulfill the state's requirement for licensing teachers; there was little time for extra.

I wonder about a program that teaches novice teachers about the need for justice in education, but does not support them doing that work in the classroom. Do we think that they are going to be able to do that work in schools, in the face of racist tests, racist standards, racist districts, racist budgets, racist administrators, and racist secretaries of education? Or do we know that they will struggle, likely fail, and

either revert to the status quo or leave the profession?

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Appendix

Let me tell you about my marvelous god
By Susan Stewart

Let me tell you about my marvelous god, how he hides in the hexagons
of the bees, how the drought that wrings its leather hands
above the world is of his making, as well as the rain in the quiet minutes
that leave only thoughts of rain.
An atom is working and working, an atom is working in deepest
night, then bursting like the farthest star; it is far
smaller than a pinprick, far smaller than a zero and it has no
will, no will toward us.
This is why the heart has paced and paced,
will pace and pace across the field where yarrow
was and now is dust. A leaf catches
in a bone. The burrow's shut by a tumbled clod
and the roots, upturned, are hot to the touch.
How my god is a feathered and whirling thing; you will singe your arm
when you pluck him from the air,
when you pluck him from that sky
where grieving swirls, and you will burn again
throwing him back.