A commitment to socially just teacher preparation: Novice teacher educators' reflections on participation in a community of practice

Rachelle Curcio University of Florida
Stephanie Schroeder University of Florida

Through reflective narrative, we present our experiences in a Community of Practice (CoP) committed to teacher preparation for social justice. First, we discuss the CoP's origination and then reflect upon how our participation informed our practice as novice teacher educators. Specifically, we propose that novice teacher educators' participation in a CoP may further cultivate an inquiry stance and inform evolving identities as teacher educators for social justice. Additionally, we posit the value of establishing CoPs as a collaborative think-space to problematize practice for all teacher educators striving to bring a social justice stance to their work.

All teachers face challenges, yet for novice teachers in our nation's most diverse schools these challenges may seem near impossible to overcome. Disparities across race, class, gender, language, and ability continue to grow in the United States, even in (or perhaps because of) an era of strict accountability (Dover, 2013). Ultimately, the goal of education is to provide students opportunities to learn, thereby enhancing their lifetime opportunities (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillian, 2009). Unfortunately, many students in our nation are not achieving success in school, academic or otherwise. Many students have lost their hope, and are simply coping, not flourishing, in our classrooms (Duncan-Andrade, 2011; Grant & Gibson, 2011). In order to reverse these trends, there is an urgent need to instill a social justice stance in rising teachers to better equip them to meet the needs of our diverse 21st century classrooms.

Teacher preparation for social justice understands teaching as a "lifelong journey of transformation" (Nieto, 2000, p. 184) that strives to challenge traditional ideologies in order to eliminate educational inequalities. While teacher education has stressed a social justice stance over the past two decades, a need remains to reevaluate teacher education's stance towards social justice and its role in preparing teachers to effectively respond to all students (Duncan-Andrade, 2011; Grant & Agosto, 2008). If the goal is for teachers to approach diversity from a social justice perspective, then teacher educators should collectively work to identify the contexts and practices that best prepare candidates to teach for social justice. This paper shares the experiences of two novice teacher educators in their quest to identify those practices that prepare teacher candidates to teach for social justice. Specifically, we reflect on how our participation in a Community of Practice (CoP) has supported our social justice stance and evolving teacher educator identities. After sharing our reflections, we bring together literature from three disparate bodies of scholarship in teacher education to illuminate how the development of social justice teaching practices can be both immersed in inquiry and developed collaboratively as a means of ensuring lasting and meaningful change.

Presently, we [the authors] are Curriculum and Instruction doctoral candidates at a large Southeastern research university. Before beginning doctoral studies, Author 1 was a veteran educator spending seventeen years in an urban Florida school district. During this time, she served as an elementary classroom teacher, reading coach, district resource teacher, and assistant principal within diverse high-poverty K-5 school settings. Author 2 has been an educator for seven years, three of which she spent teaching secondary social studies and English in Central Florida and Queens, New York. During her secondary teaching experiences, Author 2 taught in a variety of school settings with students from a range of economic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. From these varying experiences in elementary and secondary classrooms, both authors developed a passion for teaching and learning in diverse, high-poverty contexts.

While we both possessed a passion for enhancing the educational opportunities for marginalized student populations, we realized upon entering our doctoral program that we lacked theoretical knowledge to effectively articulate our passion. Consequently, during a doctoral critical pedagogy seminar focused on critical social justice theory, we began to acquire essential knowledge that informed our developing social justice stance. Based on shared commitments, a CoP, consisting of four doctoral students and the professor who facilitated the critical pedagogy course, evolved to support our continued development as teacher educators committed to social justice. A CoP, defined by Lave and Wenger (1991), is a "system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other…overlapping communities" (p. 98). Like our CoP, such communities develop naturally, bringing together individuals engaged in similar practices (Wenger, 2010).

As novice teacher educators, the CoP served as a space to collaboratively problem solve and develop collective capacity related to teacher education for social justice. Ultimately, we embraced an overarching goal of potentially cultivating teacher candidates' social justice stance, while simultaneously developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to teach within our nation's diverse classroom contexts. The collective nature of the group and our problem-solving focus defined the CoP, and our "shared ways of engaging in doing things together" (Wenger, 1998 as cited in Roberts, 2006, p. 625) aided in the facilitation of dialogue. Indeed, during our regular CoP meetings we engaged in dialogue to develop our theoretical knowledge and troubleshoot personal attempts to apply theory to practice. One exercise we completed as a CoP included personal goal setting to focus the work of our community. Our narratives below reflect upon our original goals and share how our CoP experiences informed our instruction and helped us meet our overarching objectives. Additionally, we discuss our ongoing work as socially just teacher educators in hopes that our experiences may inform the work of other novice teacher educators striving to teach for social justice.

Author 1's Reflection

As a doctoral student focused on enhancing teacher preparation and clinical practice to meet the needs of 21st century classrooms, part of my preparation included serving as a supervisor in a pre-internship practicum experience. The initiation of our CoP occurred during my third semester of supervising/instructing pre-interns, a semester in which I intended to intentionally shift my instructional practices to explicitly support the cultivation of teacher candidates'

critical reflective stance. My intended instructional shift occurred after participating in the critical pedagogy seminar and engaging in a practitioner inquiry related to enhancing candidates' reflective practice. From these experiences, I discovered I was implicitly addressing social justice concepts, so I sought to deepen my understanding and practice related to cultivating a critical reflective stance. Essentially, my goal was to instill an inquiry orientation that encouraged pre-interns to not only critically reflect on their classroom, but also the world around them in an effort to examine personal experiences, beliefs, assumptions, and question status quo.

Howard (2003) defined critical reflection as a tool for "incorporating issues of equity and social justice into teaching, thinking, and practice" (p. 195). Additionally, critical reflection involves problematizing and examining how racial and cultural contexts impact teaching and learning, and it strives to move individuals towards discovering solutions and taking action. Gay and Kirkland (2010) stated that many teacher educator programs are void of authentic opportunities for teacher candidates to engage in deep, critical reflection related to teaching and learning; thus my goal was to explicitly support my students in a manner that provided opportunities to engage in critical reflective practice. While this objective may have sounded simplistic initially, it proved to challenge my developing teacher educator identity and engendered discomfort and dissonance in the integrated seminar.

Participating in the CoP provided space to dialogue and reflect on course content and pedagogical decisions, as well as successes and failures I was experiencing in the classroom. The ability to share frustrations and potential roadblocks became a source of support and knowledge to assist me in refining my practice as a teacher educator committed to social justice. I quickly learned that teacher education for social justice is not a solo endeavor, and our CoP represented a collective commitment for equity, action, and change. For years, I lacked the language to communicate my objections to inequities I witnessed in schools and thought I was alone with my passion. However, Wenger (1998) argues, one of the defining features of a CoP is its ability to bring together individuals with a shared "perspective on the world" (Roberts, 2006, p. 625). Through our CoP I have gained knowledge and insight but, more importantly, confidence to move forward with my goal of cultivating teacher candidates' critical reflective stance to challenge educational inequities and level the educational playing field for all children.

In particular, my collaboration in the CoP contributed to explicit instructional adjustments focused on cultivating an inquiry orientation and a critically reflective stance. CoP dialogue focused on attaining our goals, not only enhanced the intentionality of my seminar instruction and supervision interactions, but also provided connections to resources and ideas. For example, within the seminar there was a required lesson planning assignment that was historically a rote task. I sought to adjust the assignment so teacher candidates could more critically view classroom demographics to deepen knowledge of students, identify student strengths, and begin to form an asset-based perspective. When sharing this goal in our CoP, a peer reminded me of a visual that presented the differences between "deep culture" and "surface culture," commonly referred to as 'the cultural iceberg' (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2013). The use of this visual aided the candidates in more critically reflecting upon their class demographics and enhanced lesson planning.

Additionally, academic literature referred by my colleagues helped to extend

my theoretical and pedagogical knowledge. Reading Garett and Segall's (2013) piece on "(Re)defining Resistance and Ignorance" broadened my perspective that resistance could be interpreted as "positive tension" (p. 300) that may lead to new understandings. While reading I was struck by the authors' emphasis on the paramount role pedagogical decisions played in productively fostering this new learning. The article provided me a new lens to better embrace resistance and refine my instruction to more effectively transition teacher candidates from resistance to learning. As Garrett and Segall (2013) stated, resistance can be seen as "part of a successful pedagogy, one that is a marker of student engagement" (p. 301). Honing my lens towards embracing resistance and dissonance in the classroom has consequently aided in my facilitation of resistance in the classroom - an adjustment that may not have occurred without the knowledge gained in my CoP.

Fast forwarding to the present, I find myself wondering how I might continue to enhance my knowledge and skills as a teacher educator committed to social justice. As I have embarked on additional roles within the elementary program, new insights and wonderings have arisen. From these experiences, I recognize my evolving identity and admittedly struggle with how to best prepare our predominantly white teacher candidates to critically reflect upon educational inequities and advocate for all students. With the support of the CoP, and a persistent personal inquiry stance, my commitment and passion towards socially just practices has been reinforced. More importantly, I am certain our community will continue to develop our collective capacity in a supportive setting.

Author 2's Reflection

Similar to Author 1, I have found the CoP to be a powerful resource as I navigate the field of teacher education. I was fortunate enough that the CoP organized in the second semester of my first year in the doctoral program. Serving as a field supervisor for students in their practicum placement at local elementary schools, my classes were small—ten to fourteen students each semester—so we had the opportunity to engage in rich discussions about their practice, and I helped facilitate their semester-long inquiry projects. Facilitating these rich discussions about practice in the teacher preparation classroom complemented the rich discussions that my colleagues and I had in our CoP. More importantly, the CoP meetings gave me the tools and confidence to weave my social justice stance into discussions and activities I planned with and for my students. Specifically, the acts of goal setting and then reflecting on and soliciting feedback from the CoP regarding my goals, were essential practices that altered my teaching and facilitated the development of my own social justice stance.

First, setting personal teaching goals that I shared in the CoP helped me to make explicit what before might have been implicit. As a classroom teacher I held social justice beliefs and implicitly wove those beliefs into my practice, but I was not operating at a level of conscious awareness. The CoP helped to concretize what before had been abstract. My original goal for the CoP—for "students to leave my class with a social justice stance that looks at the multiple perspectives…seeks equity over equality as a solution"—still remains in a level of abstraction, but the act of voicing this goal was crucial to ensuring that class activities would align with both curriculum requirements and social justice ends. In my reflective journal I asked myself questions such as:

> How does my instruction coincide (or fail to coincide) with my belief in social justice? When am I promoting

> what I think is right without thinking of what my students need? What pedagogical techniques are best suited to introduce and discuss difficult topics?

These are questions without easy answers, but as the CoP evolved, we began asking each other these questions regularly while seeking solutions from our own experiences and scholarly literature.

Reflecting during the CoP on my goal to instill a social justice stance in my students helped me troubleshoot my pedagogical choices. During the first semester in which I participated in the CoP I found that the dynamic discussions my students engaged in about general teaching practice or their own personal inquiry projects fell apart when topics like race, poverty, or immigration came up. My students' silence worried me, and I wondered if they could really learn about social justice if they refused to communicate. Members of the CoP helped me to understand the silence, pointed me to literature that further illuminated the classroom dynamics (DiAngelo, 2012), and suggested strategies to facilitate dialogue. For example, one of my colleagues recommended that I "include different participation structures to accommodate different styles [or] level[s] of confidence. Chalk talk and carousel [walks] enable people to participate more quietly." Another member of the CoP suggested to "use the zones of learning—comfort, risk, danger zones—in the beginning of the session to normalize discomfort in the learning process." These protocols, drawn from the National School Reform Faculty, were not new to me, but recommended in this context they were newly beneficial. As a result of the helpful suggestions from my CoP, I was able to engage students in ways other than traditional conversation and bookmarked strategies for use in subsequent semesters.

While instilling a social justice stance in teacher candidates continues to be an important goal, participating in the CoP has enabled me to refine my goals for practice and beyond. I have since questioned, with support from my colleagues, whether social justice can be instilled in students at all or if it must bubble up from their own felt difficulties of practice. I wonder, too, what a social justice stance might look like in teacher candidates and how it might be measured or observed. Transitioning to teaching a social studies methods class has also shifted my focus to the confluence of social justice education, teacher education for democracy and citizenship (Novak, 1994), and the role of the teacher educator in influencing (and learning from) the public consciousness (Kumashiro, 2016). Embarking on the fourth semester of the CoP, I also find myself shifting from setting goals to developing wonderings and problematizing practice, much in line with Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) inquiry stance.

Connections

As apparent from our reflections, we both contend that our participation in the CoP has served as a valuable collaborative space to inform our evolving theoretical and pedagogical knowledge. While we recognize our continued development as socially just educators, we realize that participation in the CoP has not only solidified our commitments towards socially just teacher education, but has enhanced our dedication. Through analyzing our [the authors] collaborative and individual reflection we have identified some overarching connections related to our CoP experience that we hope will further assist us, and others, in productively and successfully moving forward as socially just teacher educators.

First and foremost, the ability to participate in a CoP focused solely on our practices as teacher educators for social justice reignited our budding inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Both of us have always held an inquiry stance; however, through our doctoral studies our inquiry stance has evolved into a critical aspect of our identity as socially just teacher educators. An inquiry stance can be defined as "a worldview, a habit of mind, a dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across the course of the professional career" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 113). As mentioned in our reflections, over time our goals have transformed into wonderings that have guided us as we individually and collectively problematize practice and the social context of schooling. As Dana (2015) stated, an inquiry stance becomes, "a professional positioning or stance, owned by the teacher, where questioning, systematically studying, and subsequently improving one's own practice becomes a necessary and natural part of a teacher's work" (pp. 162-163). Hence, we have come to realize our inquiry stance is the beacon to guide us as we engage in teaching and research aimed at preparing critical and reflective teacher candidates.

Another productive outcome from the CoP has been its influence on our "occupational transition" (Murray & Male, 2005 p. 126) from K-12 school-based educators to university-based teacher educators. While we both entered our doctoral programs eager to delve into roles as teacher educators, we did not anticipate the challenges surrounding our evolving identities. From navigating the institutional context of a research-intensive university to the professional socialization encountered within our immediate dual role of doctoral student/teacher educator, our identities were in flux. Added to this flux was our desire to deepen our knowledge and articulate our beliefs as educators committed to socially just practices. From this state of instability and change came a longing for "supportive others" (Dinkleman, Margolis, & Sikkenga, 2006, p.14) to alleviate stress and provide a sense of community. Essentially, the CoP became our "supportive other" and has served as a source of encouragement and information during our induction to teacher education; however, we realize this is unique. As Murray and Male (2005) communicated, establishing one's identity as a teacher educator typically occurs over multiple years and many individuals lack guidance to navigate higher education. While we feel fortunate for our supportive environment, we wonder how our evolving professional identities may have fared without the CoP. In particular, we wonder how the use of CoPs can support the "occupational transition" for socially just novice teacher educators within an unsupportive institutional environment.

Finally, collaborative dialogue emerged as an instrumental facet of our CoP that contributed to the evolution of our critical inquiry stance and professional identities. Wenger et al. (2002) identified that CoPs are "built on the collective experiences of the community members" and include "open dialogue" (p. 54) among all members. Our CoP dialogue, consisting of everyday interactions, focused problem solving, resource sharing, and collective inquiry, has become an occasion to not only learn from each other, but to genuinely engage in inquiring conversations. Just as our personal critical inquiry stances evolved, collectively our CoP has transformed into a community of inquiry in which dialogue has become an "existential necessity" (Freire, 2005, p. 88) for continued growth. Overtime, our CoP has engaged in "joint construction of knowledge through conversation and other forms of collaborative analysis and interpretation" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 53). Through our conversations, written

reflections, and engaging with literature we have been able to make our "tacit knowledge more visible, call into question assumptions about common practices, and generate data that make possible the consideration of alternatives" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 53). Our CoP's collaborative knowledge construction has heightened our desire to reject status quo and continuously pushes our current thinking related to socially just practices in teacher education and beyond.

Conclusions

As a result of our positive CoP experience, we strongly believe that communities of social justice-oriented teacher educators should be fostered and encouraged in teacher education programs, especially in programs that rely heavily on graduate assistants to teach certification courses. While communities of practice cannot be forced (Pharo et al., 2014), providing the institutional and intellectual space for those communities to form is essential to their development. Cultivating space for CoPs in university settings not only provides opportunities for collaboration and the sharing of knowledge and resources, it provides space for the "consideration of alternatives" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 53) beyond the status quo or what we might have individually viewed as either natural or inevitable.

For those hoping to bring a social justice stance to their work in teacher education, communities of practice can serve not only as sites of inquiry and professional learning, but also as sites of growth and confidence-building. Teaching for social justice can be a lonely endeavor. Perhaps the most important thing the CoP has done for us is to connect us to those who are teaching for a common goal. Social justice cannot be sought in a vacuum. Committed as we are to our inquiry stance, we feel it is incumbent upon us to share with the larger social justice community our experience in a CoP, and, by sharing these experiences we hope to urge others to cultivate such groups in their own settings.

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Rachelle Curcio is a Ph.D. candidate in Curriculum, Teaching, and Teacher Education at the University of Florida researching clinical experiences and supervision, critical reflection, and teacher preparation for social justice.

Stephanie Schroeder is a Ph.D. candidate in Curriculum, Teaching, and Teacher Education at the University of Florida researching democratic education, the social context of education, and pre-service social studies education.