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Exploring Agency for Equity in Teacher and Leadership Education Programs: A Self-study Approach

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Research Questions

This study used a qualitative self-study method approach to investigate the ways three researchers define and enact teacher agency for equity and social justice in their teaching practices.

❖ How has our understanding of social justice changed during our professional and teaching career?
❖ How do our personal and professional relationships inform our understanding of equity?
❖ How do we relate our teacher identity to the teacher agency in the context of social justice?
❖ How do we enact teacher agency, as defined by Rios (2018) through sense of purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity in our own teaching practice?
❖ Are we passing along the social capital (Bordieu, 1990) of social justice to our students?

Methods

Qualitative Data Sources
❖ Four digitally recorded dialogues as shared reflections, each focused on one of the dimension
❖ Classroom observations

Participants
❖ **Gender:** 3 female researchers (100%) at suburban college
❖ **Ethnicity:** Caucasian (66.6%), and Asian/American (33.3%)
❖ **Country of origin:** Hungary (33.3%), Poland (33.3%), United States (33.3%) with Indian-Pakistani heritage
❖ **Years of teaching experience:** 21 (33.3%), 16 (33.3%), and 13 (33.3%), Total of 50 years of teaching, Mean = 16.7

Procedure
Researchers followed the **self-study methodology** for teacher educators aimed at improving professional practice settings, as well as **collaborative inquiry** of self-initiated, focused, interactive, and improvement driven method (LaBoseky, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Teacher education programs are increasingly seen as vehicles for instilling social justice in our society (Ladson-Billings, 1995)

How can we prompt our students to learn "to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1994, p. 17

Conscientious Engagement for Teacher Agency (Rios, 2018)

❖ **Authentic Presence -** Our mind, body and spirit are integrated to inspire and communicate purpose.)
❖ **Entanglement -** We are entangled with some people more than others and these relationships impact how we behave in the world
❖ **Meliorism** (We can imagine and build a better world)

Rios' (2018) framework informs teacher agency for social justice by focusing on intellectual, emotional and spiritual pathways we choose as we challenge our own assumptions, beliefs and practices.

Results

Understanding of Social Justice & Equity
❖ Informed by personal, professional and theoretical approaches
❖ Viewed as idealistic but not always pragmatic
❖ Viewed as providing opportunities to people regardless of their background
❖ Social and cultural capital of how to take part of the given opportunities
❖ **Entanglements**, with pivotal moments and critical people who shaped our understanding of equity

Teacher Identity & Teacher Agency
❖ **Autonomy** as a dimension addressed in multiple ways
❖ Co-teaching environment – creating and sharing the learning space
❖ **Authentic presence & authentic self** – *"putting on a teacher's hat"* or *"putting on a show"*
❖ Primacy of teacher identity over teacher agency for authentic presence
❖ **Reflexivity**, as a capacity to analyze and evaluate own teaching practices
❖ Deep-rooted interest in reflecting on our own work
❖ Supportive culture of the institution
❖ Open-door policy to visit any professor's classroom to gain new perspectives on teaching and reflection

Results (continued)

Classroom Applications of Teacher Agency for Equity

❖ **Meliorism,** build a better world (and a better classroom)
❖ The confidence and competence as teachers and teacher agents came with time and experience (semesters & years).
❖ Shaping the classroom culture to address issues of equity with heightened levels of awareness of the dynamics in the classroom
❖ **Multiple mentorship** model of the leadership program
❖ *"as a professor at the helm of the class, I may not be the expert that the students need"*
❖ Finding the balance between being a model of change without imparting preset ideas about what change is
❖ Sense of purpose with own beliefs about our role as teacher agents
❖ *"We are here to guide them but we also are here to disturb a little bit of their inertia that they can start thinking about things in different ways."*

Conclusions

In recent years, multiple stakeholders, including schools of education, faculty, community members, and policy-makers, have become vested in the idea of schools and teaching as a critical avenue of social justice. It is crucial, then, for faculty, who teach future teachers or school leaders, to understand their own progression as social justice mentors and teachers. Participating in this process of self-study allowed us, the researchers, to engage in enhanced critical reflection about our own teaching practice and how it is molded by our cultural heritage, teaching identity and experience in classrooms that incorporate themes of social justice. The interplay of these factors and analysis of the various ways we enact teacher agency for equity allowed us to view the extent of our conscious engagement in the classroom; these findings may inform the ways in which programs that emphasize social justice utilize the experiences and ideas of their faculty to create unique curriculum. Additionally, the dynamic nature of teacher agency was highlighted in our authentic presence and freedom to determine when and how we reveal our authentic self through our teaching practices. Such reflections illuminate the complexities and implications of the equity teaching practice and its continuous progression.

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