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Stephanie Speicher

Weber State University, stephaniespeicher@weber.edu

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Corresponding Author

Stephanie Speicher, Weber University, Moyes College of Education, Education Building, Room 309, Ogden, Utah 84408

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Building Community Using Experiential Education With Elementary Preservice Teachers in a Social Studies Methodology Course

Stephanie Speicher

College of Education
Weber State University, United States
stephaniespeicher@weber.edu

Abstract

There is urgency for teacher educators to instruct preservice teachers in the tenants of social justice education. This urgency is based upon the American demographic landscape and the responsibility of educators to teach for social justice. Preservice teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to educate for social justice when entering the classroom setting (citations from below). Feelings of incompetence in social justice teaching expressed among preservice teachers coupled with minimal examination in the literature of the effects of teacher education practices that aid in the readiness to teach for social justice provided the foundation for this study. This study examined experiential methodologies that can prepare preservice teachers to teach for social justice, particularly within a social studies context. The study focused on two research questions: (a) How do preservice elementary teachers in a social studies methods course conceptualize teaching for social justice within an experiential framework? (b) In what ways did preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum classroom? Also examined was how the development of community in a social studies methodology course fostered the understanding of teaching for social justice. The findings highlight how preservice teachers were able to conceptualize building communities with experiential methods to teach for social justice and how doing so created an effective learning community. Although the preservice teachers valued the implementation of experiential methods to foster the teaching of social justice, difficulties were expressed in their incorporation of experiential methods in the practicum environment due to a lack of confidence, teaching competence, or collegial support.

Keywords: case study, qualitative, teacher education, community

Introduction

Preservice teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to teach for social justice within the classroom setting (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Dover, 2013; McDonald, 2005; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016; Pugach et al., 2019; Picower, 2012; Storms, 2012; Ukpokodu, 2007). Researchers believe one potential cause for these feelings of inadequacy is because students in teacher preparation lack the requisite skills to teach for social justice, thereby, resulting in a lack of ability to create educative social justice opportunities in the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 2004; McDonald, 2005).

Teacher educators should not be latent nor simply wait for teaching for social justice skills to just develop on their own within preservice teachers. Nieto (2000) writes about the *sluggish pace* with

which teacher education programs approach teaching for social justice with preservice teachers, despite the rapidly changing demographics of the student population in public schools. The problem of fully incorporating social justice opportunities into classrooms across the U.S. is larger than the individual student or professor (Cochran-Smith et al, 2009; Pugach et al., 2019). Within the education community, there has been minimal examination of how preservice teachers transfer social justice theory into actual pedagogical practice (Dover, 2013; McDonald, 2005; Villegas, 2007). The lack of analysis on the transfer of skills to teach for social justice is of concern for teacher educators because of the ever-growing identification of the disconnect between preservice teacher preparation and effective concrete pedagogical practices (Dover, 2013; McDonald, 2005).

However, the use of experiential education can be a flexible pedagogical tool in teaching for social justice with preservice teachers (Moore, 2008). Experiential education activities can create an environment that provides opportunities to build both trust and a sense of community (Carver, 1996; Obenchain & Ives, 2006). Trust and community are two elements critical to teaching for social justice in classrooms (Picower, 2012). Strengthening classroom communities, through the use of experiential methods, impels students to delve into social justice ideology in an atmosphere of trust (Picower, 2012).

Particularly, social studies methods taught within an experiential framework can be an exceptional tool to build skills to teach for social justice in preservice elementary teachers, because it can connect historical content and real-world experience (Brawdy, 2004; Carver, 1996). Experiential activities can mirror the unexpected problems that individuals face (current and past) in real-life settings that must be dealt with using innovation and creative problem-solving (Carver, 1996; Smith et al., 2002). This is the value of teaching and learning using experiential frameworks; students are absorbed in purposeful activities that put acquired knowledge to use. Stevenson (1990) illustrated this claim with authentic feedback from students, who stated they are most engaged in subject matter when it is related to real-world experiences, as well as instruction that enabled them to participate in thinking and learning actively.

Literature Review

Kolb (1984), a pioneer in experiential learning theory, explained that an educator's job is to create opportunities for students to actively engage and reflect on their growth as both individuals and members of a learning community. This learning process begins by bringing out the learner's beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new and refined ideas into the learner's belief systems within a given community. Following this cycle, a more meaningful learning process is facilitated (Kolb, 1984). Understanding an individual's beliefs and perspectives are central to social justice teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Villegas, 2007) and a critical link to experiential learning theory. It is through the experiential learning process that preservice teachers will be able to build skills to teach for social justice and will allow researchers to gauge whether or not they will use their newly acquired knowledge in the classroom setting.

Teaching individuals to work together was extremely vital in forming the foundation for this research study because the study was based on cultivating the elements of teaching for social justice within a community of learners, specifically preservice teachers. Kohlberg (1969) wrote about the concept of *just communities*, in which the behavior of the individuals is raised to a higher level by their affiliation with a group. The values and norms necessary for groups to function safely and efficiently in experiential activities have an abundant potential to create this just community. The necessity for people to get along, share resources, be concerned with the welfare of other participants, and view their personal behavior in the context of the group, helps create conditions for a *just community* (Garvey,

2002; Kohlberg, 1969) and is a critical link to social studies education (National Council of the Social Studies [NCSS], 2010).

Several themes emerged in the literature review, specifically the importance of developing a classroom community and the need for active participation in the learning process to successfully teach for social justice. Coupled with these overarching themes, the review process revealed distinct gaps in the literature. An absence of literature examining the effects of focused experiential methodologies to cultivate the ability to teach social justice with preservice teachers, specifically in a social studies context, was evident. Therefore, grounding this study in Experiential Learning Theory (Carver, 1996; Kolb, 1984) and Social Justice Teacher Education (Dover, 2013; Picower, 2012; Storms, 2012) was essential to adequately examine community and active participation in the learning process, as well as address the identified gap between utilization of experiential methodologies and promotion of teaching for social justice in and among preservice teachers.

Methods

This qualitative case study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2005) examined if experiential methodology can prepare preservice elementary teachers to teach for social justice, particularly within an elementary social studies context. Specifically, the study focused on two primary research questions: (a) How do preservice elementary teachers in a social studies methods course conceptualize teaching for social justice within an experiential framework? (b) In what ways did preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum classroom? Also examined was how the development of community in an elementary social studies methodology course fostered the understanding of teaching for social justice among preservice teachers.

The goal of this study was to document and examine the individual, collective, personal, and professional experiences of seven preservice teachers as they conceptualized how to operationalize a social justice learning community built using experiential methods. In this learning community, participants explored the intersectionality of identity and investigated power, privilege, and oppression to acquire teaching for social justice skills. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) note that social justice research “has been directed toward contributing to disciplinary knowledge rather than toward solving practical problems” (p. 253). To make the research applicable to reality, instructional tools were created and activities aligned to the research questions as a starting point for learning to teach for social justice in teacher preparation programs.

The research study was designed, conducted, and implemented by the instructor who also served as the lead researcher. In this role, the researcher has an inside view and is able to perceive the research from both the role of a member of the sample group and a researcher. This insight provided the ability to connect the research to the larger picture of the program as a whole, as well as its societal context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The role as a teacher-researcher primarily included the design of suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, ensuring emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process. Often social justice research is guided and analyzed from the perspective of the principal researcher, comprised of personal biases and motivations (Warren, 2005). This is not a negative, but a reality of this kind of research. It can open gateways to knowledge and sensitizing opportunities missed often by the disconnected researcher (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Although, as the primary researcher, the instructor inevitably had more authority than the participants and so they continually returned to questions of power, control, and fairness in each stage of the research process.

To look at the methods students use to operationalize and conceptualize their ability to teach for social justice experientially on a programmatic level, their transfer of learning to the practicum setting was explored. Forming a distinct community within an elementary social studies methodology course at the university level was the first step to demonstrate how experiential methods can provide a gateway for preservice teachers to teach for social justice.

Carver’s (1996) ABC’s of student experience—Agency, Belonging and Competence—provided a lens to analyze the preservice teacher’s conceptualization and operationalization of experiential learning for the teaching of social justice. Carver (1996) recommended using the framework as a tool for the development of agency, belonging, and competence. As the course instructor, this framework was utilized so that students could develop the skills, habits, memories, and knowledge that would enable them to teach for social justice. The aim was not only to build the preservice teachers’ skill base but also met their need to belong through the creation of a vibrant learning community.

Sample

This study was conducted over the course of one traditional semester within the Teacher Education Department at a large university in the western U.S. Students were selected based on their enrollment in an Elementary Studies Methods Course; twenty-two students were enrolled in the course and seven were chosen based on their interest and consent to participate in the study as well as the demographics each individual brought to the sample, such as gender, race, and, age. The preservice teachers ranged in educational experiences, majors/endorsements, and age. The sample was representative, in relation to gender and age, of the overall population of students enrolled within the Teacher Education Program at the university, which is primarily: Caucasian; female; and aged 18 to 24. While the sample is typical of other teacher education programs in the state where the research was being conducted, it would not be considered a diverse program compared to other teacher education programs in the U.S. All students were in their final year of their teacher education program and were a semester or two away from their student teaching experience. The class met weekly for approximately six hours over a period of nine weeks; following this, students were in a practicum classroom for four weeks.

All of the preservice teachers involved in the study were female and were studying to teach at elementary grade levels within public schools (see Table 1). All but one of the participants, who was in her thirties, was a traditional-aged college student (age 18-24). Six of the participants had been enrolled at the same university for their entire collegiate experience; one student had transferred from another institution. Sixty percent of the preservice teachers did not have a secondary endorsement area outside of elementary education; two were pursuing a math endorsement, one special education, and one early childhood. These supplemental endorsements provided an added lens from which the preservice teachers might experience their coursework and practicum assignment.

Table 1. Participant Overview

Participant	Major/Endorsement Area	Student Status
Nicole	Elementary Education/Social Studies emphasis	Nontraditional
Megan	Elementary Education/Special Education	Traditional
Mellaina	Elementary Education/Math Endorsement	Traditional/transfer
Hayli	Elementary Education	Traditional
Casey	Early Childhood/Elementary Education	Traditional/primary residence out of state
Angie	Elementary Education	Traditional
Adrienne	Elementary Education/Math Endorsement	Traditional

Data Collection

Morine-Dershimer and Corrigan (1997) suggest four conditions should be created to facilitate change in an individual: time, dialogue, practice, and support. These four conditions were present in this study. Preservice teachers spent nine weeks in class learning methods to weave social justice principles into social studies content and then provided four weeks of practice and support in their practicum classrooms to implement learned methods. Throughout the semester, students participated in a variety of social studies teaching methods (i.e., inquiry lesson plans, problem-based learning, case studies, Socratic dialogue), class discussions on teaching for social justice, as well as reading applicable theory and research studies in effort to build curricular knowledge concerning the role social justice plays in social studies education.

Experiences were facilitated that promoted preservice elementary teachers seeing themselves as social reformers and developing a commitment to the reconstruction of society through the redistribution of power and other resources (Grant & Sleeter, 1988). For example, activities focused on “social action skills, the promotion of cultural pluralism, and the analysis of oppression with the intent of eventually taking action to work for a more democratic society” (Jenks et al., 2001, p. 99). Carver’s (1996) theory of experiential education methods (i.e., team building activities, outdoor education, problem-based learning) coupled with Adams and her colleagues (2007) pedagogical dilemmas were utilized to implement and model the use of experiential methods to foster classroom community through direct lesson planning and delivery of course content.

Data were principally derived from class assignments, interviews, discussions, observer notes, logs, and weekly journal reflections. Conversations and reflections with the entire class were recorded digitally. Field notes, observations, and digital recordings were transcribed and analyzed. Table 3 outlines the research questions and data sources used to answer each question.

Table 2. Correlation of Research Questions to Data Collection Methods

Research Question	Data Collection Method
How do preservice elementary teachers in a social studies methods course conceptualize teaching for social justice within an experiential framework?	Weekly Quick Writes-specific questions/prompts Little Books Textbook Evaluation Field Notes Audio Recordings Interviews
How does developing community in an elementary social studies methods course develop/foster preservice teachers understanding of teaching for social justice?	Weekly Quick Writes-specific questions/prompts Little Books Field Notes Audio Recordings Interview
In what ways did preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum classroom?	Lesson Plan Delivery and Written Reflection Audio Recordings Field Notes Interview

To connect teaching for social justice, social studies methodology, and teacher education in this study, the data sources were coded for emerging themes by implementing a series of data analysis techniques (Creswell, 2013; Krippendorff, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data, through deductive analysis, was analyzed by reducing codes to themes and from there pinpointing patterned regularities in the data (Stake, 2005). Categories were related to a conceptual framework based on the literature. Each data source was viewed as one piece of a puzzle, each piece adding to the researcher’s comprehension of

the study and its findings. This confluence of data sources added strength to the interpretation of the findings as various strands of data were woven together to construct a full picture of the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Findings

This study was based on the researcher's interest in building a learning community with experiential means to enhance students' ability to teach for social justice uniting experiential methodology, communities of practice, and teaching for social justice pedagogy. The primary goal for undertaking this project centered on the belief that preservice teachers' ability to conceptualize and operationalize teaching for social justice through the use of experiential methods was impacted by their capability to transfer their learning to the practicum environment.

Ultimately, the researcher wanted students to grasp that experiential education methodology can be a remarkable tool to connect real-world experience to social studies content, which provides a gateway to teaching for social justice. Numerous social studies standards are aligned to social justice issues (NCSS, 2010). Therefore, one would expect the students to have the ability to make connections naturally between social studies methods and teaching for social justice. With *making this connection* as a guiding goal, each class meeting was planned from an experiential mindset infusing Carver's (1996) pedagogical principles for experiential education and the ABC's of Student Experience; Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice; and Picower's (2012) elements of social justice curriculum design for the elementary classroom.

Throughout the semester, the researcher structured activities to guide students in developing their understanding of experiential learning theory and methods through specific course readings from Kolb (1984) and Carver (1996), to make connections to the larger goals of the course. Assessing the preservice teacher's conceptualization of experiential learning was critical to learning how they would apply the overarching methodological concepts to teaching for social justice. Many of the preservice teachers were appreciative of the methodology class. As Nicole noted that "our experiential lessons in the methodology course truly helped us grow closer as a class community and trust each other to complete tasks and assignments." Angie also noted that:

I felt like we developed as a family, the methodology class was structured in such a way that trust was expected, because we shared our dreams and fears...we learned to trust each other, because of all the experiential activities we did together.

Megan highlighted a distinct difference between students feeling safe and open to learn new skills in the methodology class versus other classes in the program.

Teaching experientially can create an atmosphere of openness, by pushing us to trust each other...it pushes our concept of learning in a group. To create a sense of openness, it takes teaching ability, work, planning, commitment, and time.

Coupled with these communal feelings, the preservice teachers felt teaching experientially helps students work together as a community, rather than as individuals. This mirrors much of what society expects from members of a community—the participants stated teaching experientially has the potential to build collaborative skills and allow for voices to be heard in a group context. When teaching experientially, it allowed the students to "get to know people better, how they might act in a certain situation or how someone treats others" (Hayli).

As the semester unfolded, it became evident that even though the preservice teachers were upbeat about implementing diverse methods and appeared to be enjoyed learning themselves experientially, there proved to be a disconnect in what teaching experientially really meant and looked like in the practicum setting. Data, which were contained in the participants' reflective journals, end of term interviews, the researcher's reflective logs and purposeful classroom assignments, revealed three main findings.

- The preservice teachers in the methodology course increased their agency and competence to deliver experiential lessons to teach for social justice, through engagement and education in experiential methods within their university methods course. However, the preservice teachers were not able to sustain their agency or bolster their competence to deliver experiential lessons within the practicum.
- The methodology class became a learning community through experiential methods that fostered the development of interpersonal relationships among the students, which created a strong sense of belonging among their peers in class, which helped to form the foundation to teach for social justice.
- Preservice teachers recognized that their desire for professional acceptance and belonging from their practicum colleagues was heavily influenced by collegial cooperation and support in the practicum setting, and when lacking, stifled their ability to implement experiential methods to teach for social justice, reshaping their agency and competence.

Despite feelings of doubt and challenges in the practicum classroom, the preservice teachers in this study revealed their commitment to using experiential methods, the desire to build learning communities, and the potential ability to teach for social justice. Thus, the findings of this study suggest an elementary social studies methods course, which includes experiential theoretical concepts and perspectives, can help students conceptualize their role as educators in building learning communities and ultimately enhance their agency to operationalize teaching for social justice in future classrooms if given adequate university and collegial support.

Each preservice teacher had individual conceptualization of how and why to build a learning community to teach for social justice based on their methodology class understandings and practicum experience. A common thread among the participants was a strong desire to build communities in their future classrooms combined with a professional responsibility to do so. Megan particularly noted, "It is up to me to give the students the education they need to be a productive and positive community member". Building a learning community was a non-negotiable in Nicole's eyes, "creating community creates a safe environment for students to be able to express their ideas and feelings without being judged harshly or made fun because of what they believe". The preservice teachers adamantly felt learning communities were inherent to student success, because of the practical applicability of learning to be part of community aids the teacher to create collaborative spaces. However, the participants reported that the experiential methodology, skills, and knowledge they had gained in their course preparation, was stifled when they entered the practicum because their desire to belong to the practicum community became paramount. To fully develop agency and competence to replicate the methodology skills gained from the course, the preservice teachers needed consistent collegial support and modeling, which did not occur for the majority of students in this study.

Conclusions

All too often, preservice teachers enter into schools with limited ability to create a classroom environment open to dialogue on critical social justice issues (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016; Ukpokodu,

2007). The education profession must explore how best to apply experiential education methodology to build learning communities to teach for social justice. By doing so, educators can provide students a safe, trusting atmosphere to creatively problem-solve, think critically, and learn the skills necessary to dialogue about complex social issues openly. The inherent value of experiential education is not merely a novel way to teach or present material or to have fun, but to foster trust and community to teach for social justice.

Implications

Data analyzed from this study suggested experiential education infused into a social studies methodology course can provide a strategy to build group cohesion, trust, and a sense of community, which can cultivate the ability to teach for social justice with preservice teachers. Yet, the data showed the preservice teachers needed substantial time to practice newly acquired skills in a supportive, communal atmosphere. Because the preservice teachers desire for professional acceptance in the practicum environment was paramount, they did not gain the agency or competence to implement experiential lessons to teach for social justice fully.

However, active involvement in a learning community during the preservice coursework, especially in the methodology course, provided a safety net to house feelings of vulnerability; however, it also provided a model of how to engage in a learning community for future employment situations. It is through an active learning community that teachers can transition from novice to expert through mentorship and experiences in teaching practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019), and if an active learning community had been in place in practicum experiences, the preservice teachers might have further developed their professional competence in teaching for social justice. The following strategies can be employed to create learning communities experientially to teach for social justice:

- Set norms with the class to guide behavioral expectations and outcomes by actively engaging students in the process (i.e., full value contract) from the onset of the course and revisit norms often.
- Continually model strategies with preservice teachers to debrief experiential activities to achieve social justice outcomes.
- Frequently revisit the students' definitions of social justice and experiential learning to gauge growth or the need for clarification or re-teaching.
- Ensure a university presence throughout the practicum to provide guidance and support to the preservice and cooperating teacher.
- Embed practicum experiences throughout the semester, not just during the final weeks of a course or during scheduled random visits.
- Allocate substantial time allocated to teaching a variety of methods and provide consistency in practicum expectations to ensure optimal growth.
- Create partnerships with practicum sites that embrace innovative methodologies and the tenants of teaching for social justice.
- Structure professional development for cooperating teachers with a focus on supporting preservice teachers with building agency, gaining professional acceptance, and teaching for social justice.

Limitations and Future Research

This case study has raised additional questions for teacher education programs regarding the integration of experiential education, learning communities, and teaching for social justice in coursework and program components. The present study was limited as the sample group was drawn from one course at one university with preservice teachers working within a similar context. Further inquiry would benefit from a broad analysis of the infusion of experiential methodology and teaching for social justice across a diverse demographic of teacher education programs. It is also important to emphasize that this case study relied heavily on self-report data gathered from the preservice teachers. Future studies need to include observations of practicum teaching to ascertain what preservice teachers actually demonstrate. Lastly, employing a longitudinal mixed-methods design would help teacher educators to understand how the variables of experiential learning, learning communities, and social justice interplay with each other in the development of teachers over time.

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