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BUILDING COMMUNITY USING EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION WITH  
ELEMENTARY PRESERVICE TEACHERS IN A SOCIAL  
STUDIES METHODOLOGY COURSE

by

Stephanie L. Speicher

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Education  
(Curriculum and Instruction)

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Logan, UT

2017

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## ABSTRACT

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

by

Stephanie Speicher, Doctor of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2017

Major Professor: Steven Camicia, Ph.D.  
Department: Teacher Education and Leadership

There is urgency for teacher educators to instruct preservice teachers in the core tenants of social justice education. This urgency is based upon the ever-growing shift in the American demographic landscape and the responsibility of educators to teach for equity, justice, identity and community within classrooms across the U.S. Preservice teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to educate for social justice when entering the formal classroom setting. Feelings of incompetence in social justice teaching pedagogy 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. However, to combat the lack of preparation of preservice teachers in this critical area, learning communities created with experiential methods may be the flexible pedagogical tool to increase the conceptualization of teaching for social justice in this population.

This qualitative study examined experiential methodology that 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: (1) How do preservice elementary teachers in a social studies methods course conceptualize teaching for social justice within an experiential framework? (2) In what ways did preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum classroom? Also examined was how development of community in an elementary social studies methodology course fostered the understanding of teaching for social justice among preservice teachers.

The findings of this study highlight 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 within the methodology class. Although the preservice teachers valued the implementation of experiential methods into their social studies methodology to foster the teaching of social justice, substantial difficulties were expressed in their incorporation of experiential methods in the practicum environment due to a lack of confidence, teaching competence or collegial support. Recommendations for teacher education programs are also discussed.

(202 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

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

Stephanie Speicher

There is urgency for teacher educators to instruct preservice teachers in the core tenants of social justice education. This urgency is based upon the ever-growing shift in the American demographic landscape and the responsibility of educators to teach for equity, justice, identity and community within classrooms across the U.S. Preservice teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to educate for social justice when entering the formal classroom setting. Feelings of incompetence in social justice teaching pedagogy 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.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some of the most trying and rewarding experiences I have had in my life occurred while on expeditions in the wilderness. I have spent numerous weeks of my life venturing into woods, rivers, deserts, and mountains for the purpose of educating others on the benefits and utility of experiential education. While on these expeditions, not only was I privileged to help others learn and be part of a supportive community, but I grew immensely in ways that I never could have imagined on a personal and professional level.

Over the past 6 years, while fulfilling my dream to earn a doctoral degree, I often felt like I was on an expedition, being pushed to the limits of my perceived capabilities. Each class, paper, and project were steps towards climbing the metaphorical doctoral mountain. There were countless moments filled with self-doubt, wondering if I had the stamina to complete the task at hand, but the support of my community—the USU cohort, USU faculty, the team at Maria Montessori Academy, and most importantly my family gave me the stability to keep working towards the summit—the completion of my dissertation.

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To the future...

Stephanie Speicher

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Come on, reach for the hold to the left!” Cheers from all of her peers were almost physically pushing her up the wall. I quietly wondered in my inner reflections if she would make it; could she pull over the overhang? My concentration on my thoughts was broken by loud screams and applause as Kristy made it to the top, 40 feet above the ground, her smile extended from ear to ear. As soon as Kristy descended and her feet touched the padded ground, hugs embraced her and she whispered in my ear;

So many emotions...first, I was feeling very powerful. I can do this, I have a specific goal, but then I realized I was dead tired. My goal is worth it, I thought. People I trust, my belayer, people cheering me on surround me, and even though it was hard, I knew with support I could do it. As I was experiencing these emotions; I couldn't help but think if this is how it feels when you are in a war or a protest, any civil unrest. Like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he was doing all those marches and protesting, was he experiencing those same emotions—I am so tired, but I trust the people around me, and I am going to keep moving upward. If we can have our students actually feel these emotions and apply it, transpose it to something we are teaching, they will understand it so much more.

Through my work as a teacher educator in the field of social studies and experiential education, I frequently blend social studies concepts with experiential teaching methodologies to provide students opportunities to learn how to effectively teach for social justice within a community of learners. I have witnessed that many preservice teachers are provided limited opportunities to explore the complexity of teaching for social justice and also, how to best incorporate concepts such as power, freedom, identity, equity, and community into the classroom setting (Picower, 2012).

In conjunction with this anecdotal knowledge, the research literature also

documents that preservice teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to teach for social justice within the classroom setting (Dover, 2013, McDonald, 2005; 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, in spite of 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. 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 an utmost 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 elementary education classrooms (Picower, 2012). Specifically, Dover (2013) noted that creating a supportive classroom community that embraces multiple perspectives is a pedagogical strategy to teach for social justice. It is within this type of classroom community that trust is strengthened among participants. 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, Strand, & Bunting, 2002). This is the value of teaching and learning in this way; 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.

D. A. Kolb (1984), a pioneer in experiential learning theory (ELT), 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 more refined ideas into the learner's belief systems within a given community. Following this cycle, a more meaningful learning process is facilitated (D. A. 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 ELT. It is through the experiential learning process that preservice teachers will be able to build their skills to teach for social justice and gauge whether or not they will use their newly acquired knowledge in the classroom setting.

Experiential learning focuses on the idea of group cohesion and the power of individuals' together building strength to overcome insurmountable obstacles. Recognition of this critical link by teacher educators is essential to teaching for social justice, as it is predicated on the overarching concept of a group of people coming together to work toward social action—a shared goal (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Picower, 2012; Storms, 2012). 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 of the concept of “just communities”, in which the behavior of the individuals is raised to a higher level by their affiliation with the 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 (NCSS, 2010).

### **Problem Statement**

Preparing preservice teachers to teach for social justice is “prevalent in numerous teacher education programs, partnerships, recruitment efforts, and other initiatives” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 349). A large part of social studies teacher education is preparing new teachers to challenge the cultural biases of curriculum, educational policies and practices, and school norms through the lens of social justice (Howe, 1997). However, the majority of research and scholarly initiatives continues to question the viability of traditional teacher education programs to prepare preservice teachers to teach for social justice (Blair & Millea, 2004; Dover, 2013; Storms, 2012; Villegas, 2007). Coupled with this difficulty, the knowledge-focused, technological innovations, and modernization of formal education in the U.S. has made it difficult for teachers to create meaningful classroom communities to successfully teach for social justice.

The use of experiential education methodologies is one approach that can be used to prepare preservice teachers to teach for social justice (Moore, 2008) Peterson, Cross, Johnson, & Howell, 2000; Wright & Tolan, 2009). Therefore, a clear understanding of the actual use of experiential education methodologies and its ability to prepare preservice teachers to teach for social justice is necessary (Dover, 2013; McKenzie, 2000; Warren, 2002). Explicitly, Dover stated additional research is needed to assess the classroom effects of teacher education practices and its transference to preservice

teachers' readiness to teach for social justice. This study aimed to close the gap in the literature by examining a methodology that can prepare preservice elementary teachers to teach for social justice, particularly within a social studies context.

### **Problem Rationale**

The foundation for this instrumental case study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2005) was to discover how the use of experiential education methodologies could prepare preservice elementary education students to teach for social justice within a social studies context. Conducting research with goals that provide space for marginalized voices and action toward emancipatory and democratic goals strengthened the study's theoretical framework situated within social studies education (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000).

The problem rationale was formulated from my personal teaching experience. For example, I have utilized The Wall element on a challenge course (see Figure 1) with preservice teachers as a forum to understand and discuss how present and historical, social inequities affect different groups. Serving as a catalyst to discuss content such as women's suffrage, civil rights, or colonization, The Wall opens an entirely new dimension to encourage a communal connection to social studies content. The ability to teach for social justice is strengthened when communal connections are present in lesson planning and delivery. Communal connections also open the door for meaningful and thoughtful discussion about significant issues (Speicher & Clark, 2014).

Experiential activities are a pedagogical jackpot for developing skills to teach for social justice because it can promote values of respect, social responsibility, self-



*Figure 1.* The wall (a classic experiential education activity).

actualization, justice, and freedom, all essential to the foundation of communities (Adams, 2016; Yerkes & Haras, 1997). Each time students engage in activities within a community of learners and discuss ways to transform public life by the decisions they make in a classroom they are working towards social justice.

### **Research Questions**

This study was designed to gauge how classroom communities' built from the use of experiential methods affect learning to teach for social justice with elementary preservice teachers in a social studies methodology course with an embedded practicum.

The focus was to build connections between experiential education, social justice elementary education (Picower, 2012) and social studies methods. This study was situated in an elementary social studies methodology course at a large, western, suburban university. The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to examine how experiential learning can affect preservice elementary teachers' ability to teach for social justice; and (2) to better understand how preservice teachers conceptualize their role as a teacher during their practicum experience, specifically in regards to experiential education and teaching for social justice.

The study's guiding research questions are as follows.

1. How do preservice elementary teachers in a social studies methods course conceptualize teaching for social justice within an experiential framework?
  - a. How does developing community in an elementary social studies methods course develop/foster preservice teachers understanding of teaching for social justice?
2. In what ways did preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum classroom?

### **Summary**

While teaching for social justice and building communities experientially are not novel to the realm of education, they are rarely combined, especially in the field of teacher preparation. The disjuncture between experiential learning, social justice and learning communities creates a gap in the literature, which this study means to fill. In the following chapters I explore the literature on teaching for social justice and experiential learning, outline a distinct experiential methodology used in this study, report the

findings, and offer conclusions and recommendations for the use of experiential methods to build community in order to foster teaching for social justice within teacher preparation programs and future classrooms.

In this chapter, a rationale, two guiding research questions and an overview of the study were presented. Specifically highlighted was how the study examined the role experiential education played in building a learning community to enhance the ability for preservice educators to teach for social justice.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

John Dewey asserted almost 100 years ago that education should create an “equitable society” (Urban & Wagoner, 2008). The intention of education during the Progressive Era was to provide all students with a shared set of values and skills to promote the ideals of freedom, democracy, and share in a common life (Dewey, 1916). Even with such a proactive start to address social inequity among educators, Americans continue to struggle with the interplay of power and privilege in our society with regards to race, disability, gender, and socio-economic status. Teacher education programs have been directed to address this continual presence of inequity in the course offerings, curriculum, and practical experiences provided to preservice teachers (Adams, 2016; Cochran-Smith, 2003; McDonald, 2005; Storms, 2012). The question remains as to how to increase the effectiveness of these efforts, and more specifically means to incorporate how to teach social justice in teacher preparation programs, so that future teachers will have the confidence to create social justice opportunities in classrooms.

This review of the literature is organized around the core concepts of experiential education and social justice teacher education, which is presented first. Second, an analysis of applicable social justice research within the field of experiential education and teacher preparation is presented. Third, the overarching themes of building learning communities within a teacher education context and experiential learning in social studies learning environments are highlighted. Last, the distinct absence of literature examining the effects of focused experiential methodologies to cultivate the ability to teach for

social justice with preservice teachers; specifically, in a social studies context.

### **Literature Search Process**

A preliminary search of the ERIC, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Premier databases was conducted to identify all studies published before January 2017 with a focus on the use of experiential education methodologies with preservice elementary teachers, specifically related to social justice. A variety of search terms and search term combinations were used including experiential education + teacher preparation programs + social justice, outdoor education + teacher preservice + social justice education, experiential education + preservice teacher education + social justice and preservice teachers + social justice + confidence. Approximately 47,100 articles and books were found that met the search criteria listed above. From this massive pool, roughly twenty articles were found that discussed social justice in teacher preparation programs in conjunction with the impact of the use of experiential methodologies. Of the twenty articles, six examined the use of experiential education methodologies to cultivate social justice agency among preservice teachers (see Table 1).

Articles were included in the literature review if they meet the following criteria: (a) teacher preservice and/or teacher preparation programs were the target population, (b) the use of experiential methodologies was discussed in relation to teacher preparation, (c) social justice and/or equity awareness, practices, and implementation were highlighted, and (d) the studies were experiential in nature.

After charting the articles in Table 1, several themes emerged, specifically the



Table 1

## Article Summary Table

Author/date	Design of study	Measures	Sample size	Sample demographic	Research questions	Theoretical framework	Salient findings
Wright & Tolan (2009)	Qualitative experimental or content analysis	Self-report (reflective essay)	134	Urban, undergraduate, racially/culturally diverse, majors not reported	Assess key learning events and learning outcome themes from participating in a combined adventure –based experience with community exploration assignment.	Identity formation Critical, shared adventure process	Positive outcomes in personal identity, group experience, diversity awareness, and prejudice reduction. Students also indicated the transfer to nonclassroom contexts.
Brawdy (2004)	Action research	Self-report, document/journal analysis	22	Rural, Undergraduate physical education majors	How do physical education teachers experience bi-cultural awareness in an adventure education context?	Culturally sensitive pedagogy, experiential learning	Statically significant relationships between experiential learning events and diversity outcomes.  Open dialogue between university students about the importance of reflecting upon one’s practice as a teacher through a culturally sensitive lens.
Moore (2008)	Mixed methods	Reflective writings (Book Club), interviews, surveys, researcher journal	23	Large, urban university, 16-week science methods course, some new to teaching and some career changers	How do elementary preservice teachers’ conceptions as “agents of change” shape their identities and as science teachers (what is an agent of change in science?) How do elementary preservice teachers’ perceptions as change agents frame their understanding of teaching science for social justice in urban elementary classrooms?	Critical agency, identity, social justice, critical perspectives	Science Teacher Education must play a more immediate, fundamental and emancipatory role in preparing preservice teachers in developing science teacher identities and a stance toward social justice.

(table continues)

Author/date	Design of study	Measures	Sample size	Sample demographic	Research questions	Theoretical framework	Salient findings
Ritchie (2012)	In-depth qualitative interview study	Identified as critical p-12 educators	8	From across the US, selection criteria outlined on p.123	Explore experiences that teachers enacting social justice education believe led them to teach critically.	Critical theory, critical pedagogy	Teacher networks play an important role in helping people decide to become critical educators who teach for social justice and in sustaining their critical teaching once they are in the classroom. Imperative for teacher educators to use social justice networks to recruit prospective teachers and to help existing teacher candidates form and connect networks.
Storms (2012)	Qualitative	Interview	6	Completed social justice course, undergraduate, flagship university in NE US	Glean student perspectives on how the practice in a social justice education course prepared them for social action.	Social action, engagement, social justice education	Teaching activities experientially that included students' lived experiences also increased their personal awareness, empathy, confidence, and knowledge about tools for social action. Activities were identified more than content as central in preparation for this work.
Karppinen (2012)	Applied qualitative action research	Teacher as researcher, interviews, discussions, observer notes, logs and daily diaries	6	Duration of 40 weeks, 4-6 <sup>th</sup> graders, boys 10-12 years old with social-emotional difficulties	How do pupils experience outdoor adventure teaching, and what impact will outdoor adventure activities have on pupils of school age?	Experiential learning, action research	Using nature as a context for learning and the development of ecological awareness will be increasingly essential in the future to challenges in education. Outdoor Adventure Education can be included in the public school curriculum as a supportive and holistic pedagogic and teaching method.
Storms (2013)	Action research	Interviews and document analysis	10	Inservice and preservice teachers	Explore key experiences in an AR course that promoted students' readiness for social justice advocacy.	Social justice teacher education	Being part of a collaborative, participatory and supportive classroom community was key in preparing teachers for social justice advocacy. Students indicated directly learning about access, equity, power, or privilege did not prepare them for advocacy.

*(table continues)*

Author/date	Design of study	Measures	Sample size	Sample demographic	Research questions	Theoretical framework	Salient findings
Cochran-Smith et al. (2009)	Qualitative-longitudinal	Interviews Observation	12	Preservice teachers that moved into the first two years of teaching	What do preservice/first-year teachers understand of what it means to teach for social justice, and how does this relate to classroom teaching? How do these understandings play out in practice? What are the implications of these findings for social justice in preservice education?	Social justice teacher education	“Good Teaching” is classroom practice that provides rich learning opportunities for all. Teaching for social justice is not an option, but a crucial and fundamental part of good and just teaching.
Conole et al. (1999)	Qualitative	Interviews	6	Optional cross-cultural education course for preservice teachers	Create an understanding of how to share opinions, attitudes and values in the aim to build a theory of cross-cultural education.	Experiential learning theory critical theory	Students need to be actively engaged in their construction of knowledge where diversity becomes an asset, not liability.
Timken & McNamee (2012)	Longitudinal Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews and written reflections	56 (men and women)	Preservice physical education teachers	Gauge PT’s perspectives on teaching and learning while engaged in a 10-week outdoor education experience.	Teacher belief, occupational socialization, and experiential learning theory	The inclusion of novel physical education activities that elicit strong emotional responses due to challenges with perceived and actual risk is a viable method for inducing belief change.
Green & Ballard (2011)	Mixed methods	Interviews, surveys	62 preservice teachers	Participant in Professional Development School	Research specific outcomes from involvement in the PDS program.	Experiential and adult learning theory	Produced more reflective, self-directed learners/teachers with enhanced metacognitive skills
Russell and Waters (2010)	Quantitative	Survey	Sample of 480 6-8 <sup>th</sup> grade students	Middle school	How do middle school students like to learn social studies? What do middle school students dislike about social studies instruction?	Social studies education	Students want to use technology, go on field trips, work in cooperative learning groups, and be actively engaged in the content.  Dislikes—passive learning, lecture, note-taking, busy work, rote memorization

(table continues)

Author/date	Design of study	Measures	Sample size	Sample demographic	Research questions	Theoretical framework	Salient findings
Lasky (2005)	Longitudinal Mixed methods	Interviews, surveys and other public documents	65 teachers	Teachers from all subject areas ranged in experience from 1-35 years	How are the ways externally generated reform mandates interacting with teacher identity to affect teacher agency and their experiences of willing professional vulnerability with their students?	Sociocultural theory	This disjuncture between teacher identity and expectations of new reform mandates. Teacher agency was constrained in this context and struggled to be open to students and create trusting learning environments
A. Kolb & Kolb (2005)	Longitudinal Mixed methods	Interviews and surveys	Three case studies at institutes of higher learning	Education program, MBA program, Art program	Presented data from 3 distinct case studies with different research questions.	Experiential learning theory	ELT is enhanced through the creation of learning spaces that promote growth-producing experiences for learners
Brandes & Kelly (2004)	Longitudinal Qualitative	Interviews and class assignments	21 teachers	Elementary urban based schools	How experienced teachers, who were established in schools, would translate a concern for social justice into their practice?	Various social justice frameworks	Teachers that focus on social justice issues often push the boundaries of the status quo. Fear of consequences and censorship limited teachers' vision of teaching for social justice.
McDonald (2005)	Comparative Case study Mixed methods	Interviews Surveys	Two elementary schools	Elementary schools—one urban and one rural	How do teacher education programs implement social justice in an integrated fashion across an entire program? What do prospective teachers' opportunities to learn about social justice look like in each program?	Sociocultural and theory for justice	Programs intended to integrate social justice and the implementation of social justice varied in practice due to assignment of clinical practice and experience working with or membership with an oppressed group.

importance of developing 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; D. A. 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 among preservice teachers.

## **Frameworks**

### **Experiential Learning Theory**

Experiential learning theory (ELT), upon which most experiential education activities are based, is a holistic, integrative perspective on learning that blends experience, cognition, and behavior (D. A. Kolb, 1984). What makes ELT such a powerful tool for educators is the importance on the here-and-now concrete experience that confirms and tests abstract concepts. Experiential learning theory is distinct from other approaches to traditional education and behavioral theories of learning because the emphasis is placed on the process of learning as opposed to behavioral outcomes (D. A. Kolb, 1984). Ideas are not fixed cogs of thought in our brain, but rather are formed and

re-formed through experiences leading to content acquisition.

D. A. Kolb (1984) suggests that teachers think about students in a holistic way that focuses on the “integrated functioning of the total organism—thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving” (p. 8). As Roberts (2012) highlights though, “engaging in experiential learning is risky” (p. 15). It is risky for the teacher because it is an attempt to reach students in non-traditional ways that can make them uncomfortable. Experiential activities are also risky for the students’ because they are being asked to learn from an emotional standpoint coupled with a cognitive domain or task. Students are willing to engage in this risk, if they trust the instructor and recognize why they are being asked to participate in this different kind of learning (Roberts, 2012), which may occur outside the classroom.

Vygotsky’s (1978) social learning theory enhances ELT by stressing that learning spaces extend beyond the teacher and the classroom. The transaction between the person and the social environment is critical to the learning process. Human beings are inherently social and optimal development occurs from interaction with others (Glassman, 2001). Vygotsky believed in the necessity of the relationship between experience at an individual level and the experience gained within a group. Deep conceptual thinking is dependent on social interactions, a major premise to experiential education activities (Glassman, 2001). Dewey’s educational philosophy correlates well with Vygotsky’s position on the necessity of a relationship between the individual and group in that experiential learning is a way of teaching and learning that values the individual and the collective learning that is gained by lived experience (Dewey, 1938).

More recent theoretical conversations about experiential education such as Carver's (1996) framework aligning experiential learning theory with practical applications (see Figure 2) places experiential education in the voices and actions of individuals from a variety of disciplines. By viewing experiential education through an interdisciplinary lens, ideas and actions are considered from an "ethical, psychological, social, educational, political, physical and legal standpoint" (Carver, 1996, p. 9). Carver's (1996) framework was specifically chosen for this study, because of its utility to "allow theorists to locate their work and that of their colleagues in a context that facilitates communication across disciplines" (Carver, 1996, p. 146). One of the stated goals of this study was to increase dialogue regarding experiential education implementation within teacher education and more directly elementary social studies methodology.

Carver (1996) purely defines experiential education as "...education that makes conscious application of the students' experiences by integrating them into the curriculum" (p. 10). Four core pedagogical practices embody Carver's (1996) framework:

<p><b>A</b> "A" represents the developing of students' personal agency—allowing students to become more powerful change agents in their lives and communities; increasing students' recognition and appreciation of the extent to which the locus of control for their lives is within themselves, and enabling them to use this as a source of power to generate activity.</p> <p><b>B</b> "B" refers to developing and maintaining a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of belonging—see themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power and vulnerability; learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole.</p> <p><b>C</b> "C" stands for competence, referring to the development of student competence (which usually coincides with the development of teacher competence) in a wide variety of areas (cognitive, physical, musical, social, etc.). Developing competence means learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned.</p>
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*Figure 2.* The ABC of student experience (Carver, 1996).

(1) authenticity—activities and consequences are understood by participants as relevant to their lives; (2) active learning—students are physically and/or mentally engaged in the active process of learning; (3) drawing on student experience—students are guided in the process of building understandings of phenomena by thinking about what they have experienced; and (4) providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity—students develop memories, habits, skills, and knowledge that will be helpful to them in the future (p. 11). All four of these pedagogical principals were peripheral in the lesson design and implementation of the methodology course examined in this study.

To meet the goals of experiential education within the margins of the four pedagogical principals, students are provided opportunities to learn from a holistic mindset—incorporating their senses, feelings, physical being and spiritual connections to others (Carver, 1996). Holistic learning opportunities are realized optimally when Carver’s (1996) subgoals of experiential education that are directly related to student experience are met. Explicitly, the ABC (agency, belonging, and competence of student experience; see Figure 2) should be used as a guide when developing, framing and implementing experiential learning with students (Carver, 1996). Agency, belonging and competence are supported through experiential education by incorporating resources and behaviors that promote active learning, drawing on student experience, facilitating authentic actions and connecting learning to future opportunities in a caring, trusting and accountable community (Carver, 1996). Ultimately, students are “viewed as the most valuable resource in their own education, the education of others, and the well-being of



the communities in which they are members” (Carver, 1996, p. 11). Striving for agency development, a sense of communal belonging and professional competence were paramount goals for the preservice teachers in this experiential education study examining learning communities and teaching for social justice.

### **Social Justice Teacher Education**

An obvious path has yet to emerge of how to best prepare preservice teachers to acquire the skills needed to teach for social justice, nor, how best to define social justice within the framework of teacher education. One of the most important and influential 20<sup>th</sup>-century examinations of the concept of social justice was Rawl’s (1971) research on social justice issues within the political and education spheres of society (Grant & Agosto, 2008). Rawl’s work served as a springboard for other modern scholars, such as Cochran-Smith (2010) and Adams and Bell (2016), who are actively working to build consensus on a shared definition of social justice in teacher education. Coming to consensus has been difficult; because of widespread variation on what social justice means in the context of teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 2009). Coupled with this challenge, “social justice has become a watchword for teacher education and the concept is under-theorized” (Cochran-Smith, 2009, p. 448).

Social justice teacher education has developed from a variety of disciplines and practices, including practicum and intergroup education, experiential education, black and ethnic studies, feminist pedagogies, critical pedagogies, liberal education, and social and cognitive development theories (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Drawing from these disciplines, Adams et al. outline five distinct “pedagogical dilemmas” that should drive

how social justice educators should teach rather than what they teach: (1) balancing the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process, (2) acknowledging and supporting the person (the individual student's experience) while illuminating the systemic interactions among social groups, (3) attending to social relations within the classroom, (4) utilizing reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning; and (5) valuing awareness, personal growth, and change as outcomes for the learning process" (p. 30). These pedagogical dilemmas continue to push teacher educators to create effective pathways allowing for students to delve into social justice education.

Storms (2012) describes social justice teacher education as "examining the impact of power, privilege, and social oppression of social groups and promotes social and political action to gain equity for all citizens" (p. 5). Adams (2016) depicts teaching for social justice as both a conceptual framework and a roadmap of "set interactive, experiential pedagogical practices" (p. 119). Together then social justice education enables individuals to develop the analytical tools needed to understand oppression and critique their own biases to work toward changing oppressive patterns (Adams & Bell, 2016). As seen Figure 3, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and culturally relevant teaching are all examples of social justice education in this teacher education framework (Dover, 2009; Picower, 2013).

Dover (2009) created a framework based on Cochran-Smith's (2004) beliefs of social justice education for social justice in K-12 classrooms that consisted of six key principles, which was based on culturally responsive education, multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and democratic education literature. Teachers must: (1) assume all

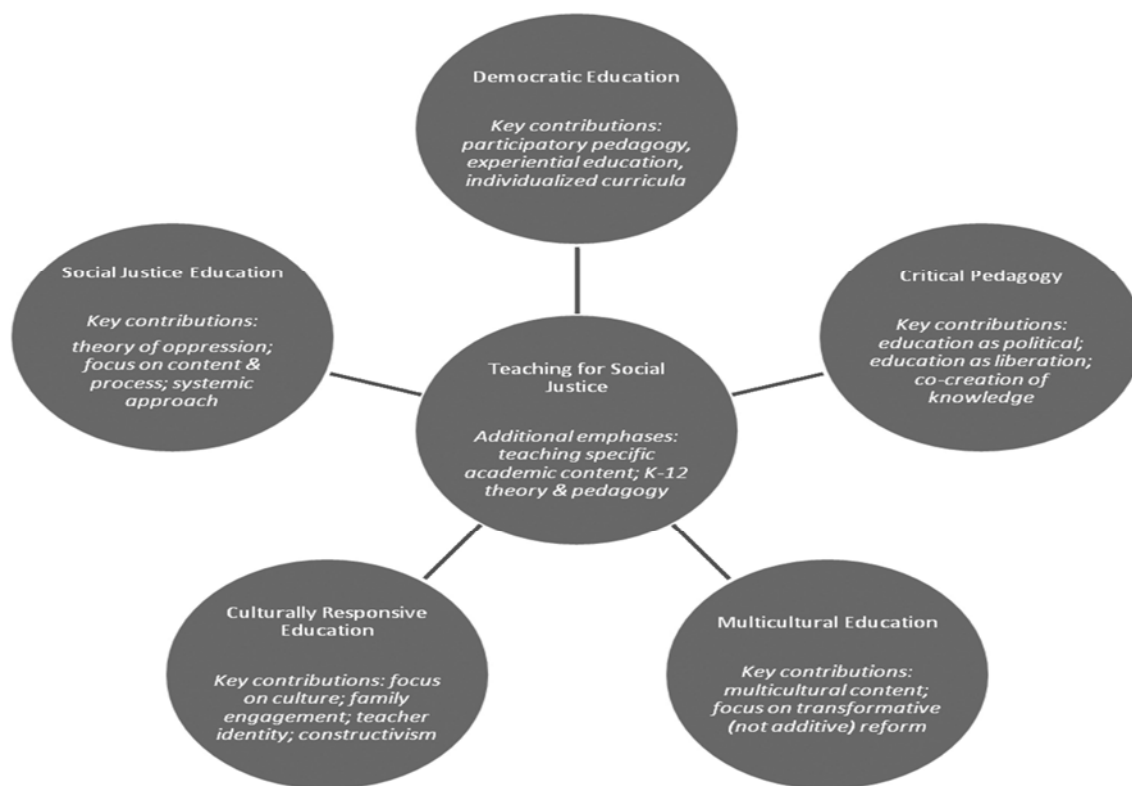


Figure 3. Pedagogical foundations of teaching for social justice (Dover, 2009).

students are participants in knowledge construction, have high expectations for students and themselves, and foster learning communities (2) acknowledge value, and build upon students' existing knowledge, interests, and cultural-linguistic resources (3) teach specific academic skills and bridge gaps in student learning (4) work in reciprocal partnership with students' families and communities (5) critique and employ multiple forms of assessment and (6) explicitly teach about activism, power, and inequity in schools and society (Dover, 2009). Brandes, Kelley, and Education, (2004) noted though; definitions of "teaching for social justice" can be varied and multifaceted. Ultimately, teaching for social justice is a product and a process (hooks, 1994). As educators, we aim for a result

or outcome (product), but inherently understanding how to achieve the product through which processes is equally important. What is unclear is how these principles are implemented in actuality. “There is little research recording and analyzing what teachers are saying and doing when teaching social justice (Brandes et al., 2004, p. 1).

Dover’s (2009) work provided concrete examples of how social justice principles might actually be employed in the classroom. However, the framework did not present a practitioner’s summary of specific characteristics that could be operationalized by teachers. Furthermore, the framework did not include the voices of teachers or principals. Hence, it would seem logical to further examine the literature on specific practices that teachers utilize to foster social justice in the classroom. Within the past few years, Picower’s (2012) outline of specific practices to teach for social justice in the elementary classroom laid the groundwork for educators. Picower’s teaching for social justice practices are self-love and knowledge, respect for others, social movements and social change, awareness raising, and social action.

Utilizing recommendations from the organization Teaching for Social Justice, this study defined teaching for social justice as follows: curriculum is grounded in the lives of our students; curriculum and instruction is critical and should help students pose critical questions about society; multicultural, antiracist projustice, participatory, and experiential; children should come to see themselves as truth-tellers and change-makers; academically rigorous, and culturally and linguistically sensitive (<http://www.teachersforjustice.org/>).

## **Analysis of Applicable Research Studies**

### **Social Justice and Teacher Education: Coursework to Practice Disconnect**

Too often preservice teachers lack the skills and agency to provide the mechanisms for students and themselves to conceptualize and operationalize the complex issues of equity, freedom, identity, power, justice, and community—central tenants of social justice education (Picower, 2012). Preservice teachers need models and opportunities to become agents of social change, and they need specific experiences to aid in the development of their view as a teacher not bound by the traditional image of a teacher (Moore, 2008; Villegas, 2007). Preservice teachers lack real-world experience, which seasoned teachers have gained in the trenches. This distinct limitation leads new teachers to enter the profession with limited confidence to teach critical social justice issues even with increased efforts from teacher education programs to incorporate teaching for social justice skills in preservice training programs (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Moore, 2008, Picower, 2011, 2012; Storms, 2012; Ukpokodu, 2007; Villegas, 2007).

In Cochran-Smith et al.'s (2009) longitudinal study of preservice teachers, which utilized interviews and classroom observations as the primary data sources, the researchers reported participants found teaching for social justice was extremely difficult, even with a stated social justice agenda. Interestingly though, the teachers did emphasize they aimed to promote critical thinking and expand worldviews in the classroom, which was inherently linked to teaching for social justice. This disconnect from coursework to practice supports the key finding from Cochran-Smith et al.'s study that even with the

strong desire to make a difference in their own classrooms, preservice teachers were skeptical of their ability to truly have a social justice impact within their school (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009).

Teacher educators have progressively concentrated attention on how teachers' knowledge, dispositions, and skills related to social justice are realized in the classroom setting (Banks, 2009; Grant & Agosto, 2008). Examples such as Giroux's (1992) work on teacher pedagogy, Cochran-Smith's (2003) in-depth review of teacher preparation, Adams (2016) definitive list of pedagogical principles and Kumashiro's (2002) universal methodology to social justice education have had an impact on approaches to integrating the tenants of social justice with teacher preparation. Overwhelmingly, these scholars and others are propelling teacher educators to assist students in becoming social justice agents of change (Adams, 2016; Grant & Sleeter, 2006). Social justice teacher education can provide preservice teachers with the "tools to examine and recognize inequality in schools" when linked to distinct social justice outcomes (Storms, 2013, p. 4). "Teacher education programs need to actively seek to promote coursework and field experiences that make explicit a preservice teachers' sociopolitical understanding of the content and insert a broader and more inclusive content knowledge base" (Blevins, Salinas, & Blevins, 2013, p. 20). But, it is simply not enough to have particular experiences and dispositions that are critical; teachers must also have the content knowledge that allows them to transfer these conceptualizations and dispositions to meaningful learning opportunities (Villegas, 2007).

Gaining an understanding of how teacher candidates conceptualize their ability

and commitment to teaching for social justice has been analyzed in a few empirical studies (Lee, 2011; McDonald, 2005). Lee pushed the teacher education community to undergo more research with the aim “to work more productively with teacher candidates to learn their conceptions of teaching for social justice and how they construct this understanding” (p. 4). Lee continued;

Although teaching for social justice continues to rise in popularity in the education arena, teaching for social justice has also produced some asceticism, critics argue that there is not enough evidence supporting the effectiveness of the pedagogy and whether it really brings either behavior or instructional changes. (p. 5)

### **Social Justice and Experiential Education**

Practitioners in the field of experiential education (EE) have substantiated the need to embrace social justice ideology and be deliberate in connecting its tenants to experiential education (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Warren, 2005; Warren & Loeffler, 2000; Warren, Roberts, Breunig, & Alvarez, 2014). Warren and Loeffler’s review of the literature stressed research in experiential education should be founded in emancipatory outcomes and research questions are based on traditional paradigms of learning of what works. Also, participants in research studies should be provided an opportunity to gain a larger grasp of how their lives are influenced by society at large (Warren & Loeffler, 2000). In actuality, the participants become co-constructors of the research study as well as its benefactors (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). Embracing participants equally in this process is based on a profound respect for the capacities of ALL members of society (Lather, 1992). Lather (1992) highlights that infusing emancipatory methods will allow for research in EE that is socially just. However, missing from the literature is the *how* to

make changes leading to a more socially just educational practice (Warren & Loeffler, 2000). This absence in the literature could be the result of experiential methods being perceived as being “too touchy-feely” or “too political” (Bell, Goodman, & Varghese, 2015, p. 414), which devalues its impact or utility to teacher educators.

## **Overarching Themes**

### **Building Learning Communities**

Building community is essential for teaching for social justice. Stoll (2009) defines learning communities as “inclusive, reflective, mutually supportive and collaborative groups of people who find ways inside and outside their immediate community to investigate and learn more about their practice in order to improve all students learning” (p. 469). There are several factors that enable the creation of learning communities to teach for social justice.

Essential to creating learning communities, preservice teachers need to be able to “engage in a joint enterprise to develop a whole repertoire of activities, common stories, and ways of speaking and acting for social justice” (Grant & Agosto, 2008, p. 189). All of these communal interactions between preservice teachers in a social justice classroom can create a feeling of “we are all in this together” when examining social justice issues (Storms, 2013, p. 16). Collectively participating in dialogue, preservice teachers can expand their perceptions and strategies of how to build social justice classrooms (Ritchie, 2012; Storms, 2012). Stoll (2009) recommends looking at learning collectively to make instrumental change in the realm of social justice in teacher education, specifically the



construction of learning communities. Creating a learning community of students and teachers dedicated to a precise cause such as social justice might be a more effective approach to creating a sense of community. Adams (2016) developed six core pedagogical principles to help guide teaching for social justice within a learning community, which substantiates the use of experiential methods to build community.

1. Create and maintain a welcoming and inclusive social justice learning environment based on clear norms and guidelines agreed to by the entire learning community.
2. Help participants acknowledge their own multiple positions within systems of inequality in order to understand how oppression operates on multiple levels.
3. Anticipate, acknowledge, and balance the emotional with the cognitive components of social justice education learning.
4. Draw upon the knowledge and experiences of participants and the intergroup dynamics in the room to illustrate and discuss social justice content.
5. Encourage active engagement with the issues and collaboration among participants.
6. Foster and evaluate personal awareness, acquisition of knowledge and skills and action-planning to create change.

Learning is not an isolated and individual endeavor; as communities grow together actively, they make meaning from both individual and collective experiences, which is instrumental in teaching for social justice (Wenger, 1998).

In Moore's (2008) study examining social justice development among preservice elementary teachers in a science context, the need to belong to a caring learning community was identified. The students felt a caring community could help address their fears and concerns to promote social justice or to affect change in science teaching (Moore, 2008). The preservice teacher's fears ranged from understanding and teaching

elementary science curriculum to diverse students to the actuality of creating appropriate social justice based lessons/activities in a science context (Moore, 2008). Fears of this nature are mirrored in other studies examining preservice teachers' ability to utilize their social justice agency (Ritchie, 2012; Storms, 2012; Villegas, 2007). For example, Ladson-Billings (1999) states, "Part of the solution in a move toward an actual paradigm shift is that teacher education programs must redefine diversity; it must include a global curriculum, an honest appreciation for diversity, a belief in the core value of cooperation, and a strong belief in the importance of a caring community" (p. 221).

Teacher preparation programs have begun to embrace attempts to create diverse communities through moving to the cohort model. Research has shown that enhanced learning occurs through a sense of community (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006). The cohort model defined by Dinsmore and Wenger involves students being enrolled in four or more classes together in a semester as a way to promote collaboration and teamwork. They report, "A sense of community encouraged in cohort structures can foster learning and discourage the intellectual and professional isolation of teachers" (p. 57), which speaks directly to Lortie's (1975) concerns of teacher isolation. Further, Dinsmore and Wenger found that shared learning experiences could lead to three main benefits: formation of supportive peer groups, active involvement in cooperative learning, and increased student participation.

### **Confidence, Collegial Support and Professional Acceptance**

What preservice teachers know and can know is shaped (and limited) by their

knowledge and lived experiences in this world. While it is certainly possible to learn about issues that have not been experienced first-hand, the “knowledge” of those issues will be interpreted through a particular lens, a lens that has been shaped by a number of variables that reflect and symbolize an individual’s social position (e.g., race, class, gender, education, geography, history, etc.) and one’s global experience (Roberts, 2012). This initial lens of perspective is also shaped by their preconceptions of their identity as classroom teachers primarily based on their experience as a student (Grossman, 1995; Lortie, 1975; Morine-Dersheimer, 2006; Villegas, 2005).

Most knowledge preservice teachers hold regarding the “realities” of the teaching profession is strongly influenced by their own student experience, which can impact their ability to enact creative methodologies into their professional teaching practice, often mitigated by their confidence to do so (Lortie, 1975; Morine-Dersheimer, 2006; Sim, 2006; Villegas, 2005). Lortie cynically referred to this as a 12-year indoctrination through repetitive observation. Later studies confirm Lortie’s observations, such as Comeaux’s (1991) research documenting views formed in school were seldom changed by students’ experiences in teacher education and Gomez and Tabachnick’s (1991) solidified this phenomenon with their finding that preservice teachers often teach as they were taught. However, Sim’s recent analysis of preservice teacher’s ability to reflect on effective models and practices can be enhanced by establishing strong and supportive learning communities, because the community forum provides a safe and non-threatening environment to discuss professional tensions or fears. Preservice teachers need experiences that empower them to make decisions and affect change on a societal level

with the goal of building relationships in a supportive community that is action-oriented (Moore, 2008, Storms, 2012).

Unfortunately, traditional teaching methods and models in preservice education courses often do not provide the space for real-world social justice development in a communal atmosphere. Social justice concepts need to be experienced first-hand, students need direct involvement in developing their democratic capacities, to question, to make real decisions, and collectively solve problems in the classroom (Au, Bigelow, & Karp, 2007; Morine-Dersheimer, 2006). Social justice classrooms function best when they are participatory and experiential (Au et al., 2007; Adams & Bell, 2016). Direct experiential involvement can be facilitated by creating learning communities, which promotes “critical friendship circles and/or inquiry groups,” through deliberate and purposeful activities (Grant & Agosto, 2008, p. 189). Sim (2006) states three critical priorities that need to be in place for the learning community to be successful: principles of effective learning and teaching should be critically examined, theory and classroom practice should be synonymous and time should be dedicated to building essential skills to form relationships in schools. It is through first-hand experience of building a learning community focused on trust and caring dispositions that preservice teachers can be moved to learn to teach for social justice.

Most advocates of teaching for social justice note that preparing preservice teachers to challenge issues of identity, freedom, power, justice and community is difficult work, having to navigate multiple barriers. Many teachers are not cognizant of the routine practices that undermine teaching for social justice and many schools do not

agree that it is the school's place to address these issues and impact the lives of the students in the classroom (Adams, 2016), so in turn a lack of modeling is available for preservice teachers. Teachers currently working with traditional schools are adept at being a content expert and therefore, when trying to facilitate an engaged, explorative, critical thinking space based on challenging variables (such as in social justice conversations) many teachers feel threatened or uncomfortable (Bell et al., 2016; McDonald, 2005). The inability to conceptualize and operationalize teaching for social justice impacts the modeling a veteran teacher can provide to a preservice educator. Ideally, teacher education programs should develop practices where practicum experiences are based on support and collaboration with the cooperating teacher or other practicum students in order to strengthen the development of teaching and learning techniques (Iyer & Reese, 2013; McDonald, 2005) for promotion of social justice.

**Confidence and collegial support.** The research literature documents confidence as a critical factor in determining to what extent preservice teachers involved themselves in the practice of teaching for social justice (Harlow & Cobb, 2014). In Harlow's study with thirty preservice teachers, a third of the participants experienced a lack of confidence in their teaching ability; due to difficulties building relationships with students and the cooperating teacher coupled with not have clearly stated expectations of preservice teacher. However, the study did reveal that the support of a connected learning community within the school appeared to enhance the involvement and engagement in teaching, because it seemed to provide the necessary support to understand and make meaning from early teaching experiences (Harlow & Cobb, 2014; Reupert & Woodcock,

2010).

Many beginning teachers are eager to teach for social justice but lack the confidence with their administration or colleagues to take a stand on contested socio-cultural issues. “Most teachers have “convictions on social matters, but there is fear in school of being controversial. Teachers are pissing in their pants all the time, because they don’t want the principal or parents breathing down their neck” (Brandes et al., 2010, p. 49). Brandes and Kelly’s study highlighted several of the participants’ dismay in their ability to count on the administration to give support when taking public stand on a social justice issue. The lack of administrator support directly impacts the confidence a preservice or in-service teacher will have when addressing social justice topics with the school or community context.

Brandes et al. (2010) found three sets of challenges teachers faced when teaching for social justice: leading classroom discussions of social issues, political resistance from administrators, colleagues, parents and students, complexities introduced by their social location and their social location of their students. hooks (1994) reinforces this point in the context of university teaching, “Given that our educational institutions are so deeply invested in a banking system of education, teachers are more rewarded when we do not teach against the grain. The choice to work against the grain, to challenge the status quo, often has negative consequences” (p. 203). Resistance or support from colleagues ultimately impacts the ability of preservice teachers to try emergent or innovative methods to teach for social justice.

**Agency, competence and professional acceptance.** Inherently a preservice

teacher's ability to gain professional acceptance is built upon the agency that individual feels they have in the school environment (Bloomfield, 2010; Britzman, 2003). The pressure to perform, particularly to demonstrate competence in areas of high priority for the practicum school, is often disconnected from the expectations from the coursework at the university (McDonald, 2005). This incongruity causes confusion amongst preservice teachers and impacts their ability to gain collegial acceptance and in construction of their professional agency (Bloomfield, 2010). Even though preservice teachers want to ask critical questions about methods observed or social justice practices, their desire for professional acceptance stifles these conversations or quires and in turn impacts their ability to develop agency and gain competence (Pantić, 2015).

Pantić (2015) provides an exemplary model to examine the intricate process of preservice teacher's professional agency development, which serves as the foundation to explore potential variables related to preservice teacher's competence in teaching for social justice. Pantić defines competence as "knowledgeability, awareness and rationalism and to gain a sense of autonomy in making impactful decisions" (p.766). In order to fully gain professional agency, the preservice teacher also needs to increase their professional competence. However, further research is necessary to gain a broader understanding of what factors influence the ability of preservice teachers to become professionally competent (McDonald, 2005). Particularly, analyzing how collaboration with colleagues and engagement with professional and social networks can enhance competence (Pantić, 2015).

The desire for professional acceptance is multifaceted. Russell (1988) pinpoints

three types of tension that interfere in the growth of the preservice teacher: tension between campus-based coursework and school-based relevance, tension between child and teacher-centered approaches, and lastly, tension between what a preservice teacher can be expected to do and what is actually implemented. Through a continual reflection process in conjunction with the practicum, within a community of learners, such as what was built within the methodology class of this study, provided the mechanism to address and provide solutions to these tensions.

In order to help the preservice teacher feel connected to the greater professional teaching community and more specifically to gain acceptance by the community within the practicum school, preservice teachers experiences should be framed around the concept of learning communities (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Cornu and Ewing argue preservice teachers success is built upon the commitment to learning communities where all teachers (i.e. preservice, inservice, mentor) ongoing professional growth is the priority. Le Cornu and Ewing's study housed with the Australian system of traditional education provided a glimpse into the stepping-stones of practicum education within their country. Initially, practicums were viewed to only serve as a place to put newly acquired knowledge to use. The focus on mastering skills and techniques with little regard for school context or professional reflection remained the stronghold for decades (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). This stronghold remained in place until the 1980s, when scholars began to view teaching as a "professional learning activity" (Calderhead, 1987, p. 1). Practicums moved from a didactic experience to an emphasis on reflection. Preservice teachers were prompted to consider the moral and ethical issues involved in teaching and



learning within a particular school context. The shift away from a didactic focus allowed preservice teachers to gain agency because by engaging in reflection during practicum it was guiding them in acknowledging their own “personally owned professional knowledge” (Le Cornu & Ewing, 1998, p. 1802). Preservice teachers were no longer viewed as passive recipients in the practicum, but were expected to take responsibility for their learning *and* to reflect on their learning experiences.

Structuring practicum experiences within a learning community creates the potential for preservice teachers to engage in team teaching and shared risk-taking which contrasts the notion of isolation in figuring out the intricacies of teaching (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Mule, 2006). Le Cornu and Ewing claim preservice teachers can build their professional agency and in turn acceptance by taking responsibly for others learning within a community. There is a dual-commitment though, mentor teachers have to commit to not “playing community” (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001. p. 955). Building an authentic community takes hard work and not to placate others opinions to avoid confrontation. Teacher educators have a core responsibility to develop social and intellectual capacities in preservice teachers to enable them to fully participate in effective learning communities (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

### **Experiential Learning Enhances Social Studies Instruction**

Many teacher educators have often experienced that traditional teaching methods lack the ability to engage students to foster dialogue on complex social issues. Experiential education can aid in bolstering dialogue on complex social issues, as it can

immerse individuals into activities with explicit social justice connections (Warren, 2002; Wright & Tolan, 2009). Experiential learning in the social studies context can foster community, trust, peer support, and potentially a suspension of assumptions on social justice issues through high levels of curricular engagement (Barrett, 1993). Challenges exist though for teachers who want to foster these ideals.

A study examining the challenges of teaching social studies to preservice teachers found six key difficulties to teaching social studies: negative past experience with social studies, confusion over the nature of social studies, conflicting/conservative sociological beliefs, applicable field experience, selecting what to teach, and lack of interest in teaching social studies (Owens, 1997). One of the challenges discussed is especially applicable to this study; preservice teachers lacked an interest in teaching social studies, because they did not see the importance of teaching social studies, so in turn, lack a commitment for teaching the content. Another key finding in this study was the need for teacher educators to learn how to encourage or motivate preservice teachers to utilize social studies content and methods to work towards improving society. Owens states that more research is needed on how to engage preservice teachers in meaningful discussions about societal issues. Experiential education is a key mechanism to lead students into these conversations and deepen engagement and increase participation, due to the intense nature of the activities (Timken & McNamee, 2012).

The physical activity associated with experiential activities elicits strong affective responses due to challenges with perceived and/or actual risk (Timken & McNamee, 2012). It is in these responses among the students that help stimulate intense emotions

through an atmosphere of acceptance, where students are willing to take risks, share, discuss and problem-solve together. For example, actively participating in experiential activities on a challenge course, students are cognitively challenged to connect new constructs because of the direct, concrete experience of working through a challenge (Sugarman, 1985). Much like what occurred during numerous watershed moments in history, like the fight for women's suffrage or strategizing ways to end the AIDS epidemic. Intense discussion ensues, as the group must decide how to move forward and act together to achieve success. It is in these moments that igniting the imagination is realized and engagement with the actual methods modeled in teacher preparation programs has numerous benefits for all learners. As teacher educators, it is inherently our responsibility to create these moments; these spaces for intense, purposeful discourse so that students can experience comfort, support, and growth (Conle et al., 2000).

Including experiential education into a social studies methodology course could promote unique engagement with social studies content and deep student learning (Kolb, 1984). Social Studies educators are eager for a change in lesson development and delivery to increase student engagement (White, McCormack, & Marsh, 2011). Gleeson, King, O'Driscoll, and Tormey's (2007) study of lesson development revealed that over 70% of teachers surveyed used textbooks as their primary teaching tool to engage students with social justice issues in the social studies classroom, despite less than five percent perceived this to be an effective method of teaching globally. Teachers have indicated that class discussions often come to a crashing halt, because of a lack of student engagement, monopolizing voices, a lack of facilitation skills on the part of the teacher,

and the low quality of the discourse itself (Hess, 2004). In contrast to these findings, learning experientially within groups has been shown to facilitate higher quality discussions in the realm of social justice, which is often embedded into social studies classrooms (Warren, 2005).

It is an ultimate goal of using social studies methodology within the framework of experiential education that students may have the chance to develop a better awareness of how others have influenced history as well as an honest and accurate understanding of their own social justice development— “...including both the privileges they enjoy and limits on their ability to impose their will on others” (Barton, 2012, p. 133). To make fair and just decisions, people must realize they are responsible for their thoughts and choices. This is very applicable on the challenge course, rock wall, or teambuilding initiative (all examples of experiential activities); because once a choice is made the consequences of the group’s actions are unavoidable.

### **Experiential Learning Enhances Teacher Education**

An example of how experiential education can be integrated into teacher preparation is a program cultivated by Brawdy (2004) for preservice education students at Saint Bonaventure University in Upstate New York. The program’s focus was on bi-cultural awareness gained from participating in an experiential education experience using the six-stage process of becoming a bi-cultural teacher (Whitfield & Klug, 2004). The students participated in a model action research assignment that focused on the potential challenges of working as a teacher with Seneca children in Western New York

(Brawdy, 2004). Complimenting student interviews, school visits, field trips, and invited distinguished speakers, all students participated in a 3-day backpacking trek through a region holding a wealth of historical significance for contemporary Seneca-US relations. Student action research papers, developed from individual data collection processes, personal journals and reflective insights from the backpacking trek were used to establish generative themes focused on the critical reflection of one's teaching practice from the perspective of the Seneca (Brawdy, 2004). Overwhelmingly, students felt the experiential experience of backpacking within the backdrop of key social justice and diversity issues was paramount in their ability understand and engage with curriculum standards.

### **Summary**

Teacher educators can create a variety of learning communities in the daily-lived experiences of preservice teachers. Stoll (2009) contends learning communities that focus on learning of all their members, and most importantly enhancing the learning of the young people encountered as educators offers an opportunity for positive change and the construction of socially just learning environments. When learning experientially is entwined with building community, learning becomes multifaceted and multidirectional and students have heightened levels of engagement (Lasky, 2005; Stoll, 2009; Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003).

Experiential learning strategically builds community, by learning for community (to enhance relationships) and learning as a community (deeply inclusive and broadly connected). This inherent respect for dignity and worth of each member of a community

will lead to collective responsibility, appreciation of diversity, a problem-solving orientation and positive role modeling in future classrooms (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001; Mitchell & Sackney, 2007; Picower, 2007). However, preservice teachers need explicit, experiential examples and models to effectively cultivate social justice agency in themselves and their students and operationalize experiential social justice lessons (Moore, 2008; McDonald, 2005). Through these direct experiences in a communal setting, preservice teachers can connect social justice content to personal and professional lives.

The review of the literature addressed theoretical foundations of ELT and social justice teacher education followed by applicable research within the field of social justice experiential education and social justice teacher education. Specifically, the overarching themes of building community, confidence and professional acceptance were highlighted. There is a distinct absence of literature examining the effects of focused experiential methodologies to cultivate teaching for social justice skills with preservice teachers; specifically, in a social studies context. Two distinct gaps were revealed. First, there is a lack of research addressing the actual processes on how to develop socially just education practices in the field of experiential education. Second, exploring the explicit use of experiential methods in a social studies context to demonstrate how preservice educators can teach for social justice is absent. Lastly, little research exists examining the obstacles preservice teachers face in their ability to teach for social justice, especially in a practicum setting.

This research study may provide teacher educators with a greater understanding

of how some preservice teachers are conceptualizing and operationalizing teaching for social justice in their individual coursework and practicum settings. Additionally, this research may provide teacher educators with a better understanding of how preservice teachers experience professional frustration due to curricular directives and their own inexperience when teaching with social justice aims. Optimally, this study aimed to provide a lens into experiential methodologies within an elementary preservice teacher learning community, which can enhance the effectiveness of social justice conversations in the classroom.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

Educators are increasingly describing their attempts to promote equity and justice in K-12 classrooms as “teaching for social justice” (Dover, 2013, p.3). Preparing preservice “teachers to teach for social justice is prevalent in numerous teacher education programs, partnerships, recruitment efforts, and other initiatives” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 349). A large part of preservice education is preparing teachers to confront the biases embedded in facets of educational policies and practices through the lens of social justice (Howe, 1997). However, the majority of research and scholarly initiatives continues to question the viability of traditional teacher education programs to train preservice teachers to teach for social justice (Blair & Millea, 2004; Dover, 2013; McDonald, 2005; Storms, 2012). It is imperative to analyze why and how to mediate the ever growing disconnects between preservice teacher preparation and tangible social justice educational practices (Dover, 2009).

Dover (2013) states additional research is needed to assess the classroom effects of teacher education practices and its transference to preservice teachers’ readiness to teach for social justice. Chiefly, this study will focus on preservice elementary teachers in a social studies methodology course. The foundation of this case study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1985) is to explore the contextual nature of teaching for social justice, the variation in preservice elementary teachers’ definition of the phrase “social justice” and how preservice elementary teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum setting. Significance for this study lies within the lived experiences of the preservice



teachers over the course of one semester in a social studies methodology course. Last, this study aimed to add to the literature on improving teaching elementary social studies in a social justice context.

Through extensive qualitative data collection, such as teacher participant interviews, journal entries, classroom assignments and observations, this study examined two primary research questions.

1. How do preservice elementary teachers in a social studies methods course conceptualize teaching for social justice within an experiential framework?
  - a. How does developing community in an elementary social studies methods course develop/foster preservice teachers understanding of teaching for social justice?
2. In what ways did preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum classroom?

### **Research Design**

An instrumental qualitative case study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1985) was utilized to answer the guiding research questions. Instrumental case studies allow for the exploration of contextual conditions bounded in a methodology course, over the course of one semester, to understand preservice teacher's conceptualization and operationalization of social justice principles in an elementary context (Creswell, 2013). Stake (2005) describes the case study research method as an effort to understand a complex phenomenon within the context of real life events. In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Stake, 2005, p. 1). In this study, each participant's

educational background was unique coupled with each participant's experiences and learning from taking an elementary social studies methods course was individualized and multifaceted. These individual differences solidified my decision to utilize a case study for this research. Lastly, the case study was framed through a transformative framework.

A transformative framework challenges participants to view knowledge as biased, subjective and how it reflects the power and social relationships within society (Creswell, 2013). The focus on "helping individuals free themselves from the media, in language, in work procedures and the relationships of power in educational settings" is central to a transformative framework (Creswell, 2013, p. 26). A transformative framework is critical in highlighting the underpinning of "cultural assumptions, the study diversity in relation to a dominant culture, and the Democratic goal of educating for equality" (Jenks et al., 2001, p. 97).

Weiler and Maher (2002) claim, utilizing a transformative framework can help participants to respect and encourage the voices of other students as well as curriculum and instruction which analyzes social inequalities. If teacher preparation programs intend to be transformative rather than stagnate, they have a responsibility to prepare their pre-service teachers to be critical, reflexive, and informed on issues of social justice. Learning communities committed to social justice may well be the avenues through which to reach these aims (Weiler & Maher, 2002).

According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), overwhelmingly qualitative research is an activity that positions the researcher into the world. It is imperative to design a study that consists of interpretative, tangible practices that make this world visible. Working within

a transformative framework, the participants co-create findings with multiple ways of knowing (Creswell, 2013).

As my research questions state, the goal of this study was to document and examine the individual, collective, personal, and professional experiences of seven pre-service teachers as they conceptualized how to operationalize a social justice learning community built with 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 my research applicable to reality, I created instructional tools and activities aligned to the research questions as a starting point for learning to teach for social justice in teacher preparation programs.

As a qualitative researcher, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The research study was designed, conducted, and implemented by myself as teacher-as-researcher. In this role, I also have the ability to have an “inside view.” and have a chance to live the life of the sample group as a member and a researcher. Having worked as a graduate assistant within the education department over the past four years provided me with a rich background in the everyday functioning of the program as well as its expectations for its students. This insight provided me with the ability to connect my research to the larger picture of the program as a whole as well as its societal context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

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

### **Setting**

This study was conducted at a large university in the western U.S. based within the Teacher Education Department over the course of one traditional semester. Students were purposefully 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. 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. This sample is typical to other teacher education programs in Utah, but 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, a semester or two before student teaching. The class met weekly for approximately 2-½ hours over a period of 9 weeks; and after this time, students were in a practicum classroom for 4 weeks.

## Participants

All of the preservice teachers involved in the study were female and prepared to teach at elementary grade levels within public schools (Table 2). 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 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 for the preservice teachers to experience their coursework and practicum assignment.

**Nicole.** Nicole described herself as talkative and sensitive. She expressed that she often would feel overwhelmed, excited, and scared in regards to her chosen path to become a teacher (Class Assignment [CA], 3). Nicole's primary goal by taking the social studies methodology course was to learn how to talk about difficult or controversial

Table 2

### *Participant Overview*

Participant name	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

subjects (CA, 2). Nicole was eager and open to learning about cultural relations and dynamics, which could be attributed to her taking the time to explore the world or traveling to countries throughout Asia during her 20s. Her global travel experience provided Nicole a distinct mission when joining the Teacher Education program. Her long-term career goal was to be in an environment where she could provide comfort, advice and love to the individuals she interacts with on a daily basis (CA, 3).

**Megan.** Kindness, honest, bossy and energetic is Megan's self-defined personal attributes (CA, 3). She expressed exhaustion at this stage of her teacher education program. As a double major in elementary education and special education, Megan has had an arduous path in her teacher education program. During our interview, she detailed how the special education program is what ultimately gave her the skills to feel confident as a teacher; she did not feel the elementary education program provided the same level of depth or rigor to formally prepare her to teach in her classroom one day. Megan wants to be in a school environment, which will provide her comfort and a sense of community as she fears loneliness and wants to be in a setting where advice is free flowing and compassionate (CA, 2).

Megan began the semester excited for the social studies methods course, because her recollection of social studies as a student was dull, date ridden, filled with assignments based on copying from the textbook and a "waste of her time." She wanted to learn how to make "social studies stick" (CA, 2). Megan was also interested in gaining a firm grasp on social studies curriculum, as she has been dependent on the Internet up to this point to guide her in classes based on historical content or teaching. Megan felt

strongly teachers are the gateway to ensuring the stability of our country by teaching future generations about history and social studies.

**Mellaina.** Mellaina described herself as enthusiastic, organized and thoughtful. She is happiest when she is traveling or using her creative energy (CA, 3). She is filled with excitement and worries for diving into the teaching profession, because she fears to be inadequate when meeting the needs of the students she encounters. She is prepared to build a classroom environment where individuals listen to each other, have an open-heart to differing opinions and are actively engaged in the curriculum.

**Hayli.** Hayli describes herself as athletic, funny, caring, and loud. She is fulfilled when she is in a loving environment (CA, 3). At times she feels overwhelmed with the path she has chosen, but the feelings of excitement for what lays ahead override any fears swirling in her head. Her greatest uncertainty stems from how best to discuss uncomfortable or sensitive issues with younger students. Her burning question and definitive goal for the semester was to learn—how could she best prepare critical thinking questions based on sensitive subject matter (CA, 2). Learning how to integrate social studies content across the curriculum on a daily basis was Halyli’s primary goal at the beginning of the semester. Often, she would recount her time as an elementary student and the inconsistency and lack of exposure to social studies content, she was firm on not wanting her students to feel that way. She desired to “sink her teeth into social studies” (CA, 2).

**Casey.** As a resident of Nashville, Casey is the only participant in this study whose defines herself as an out-of-state student. Casey depicts herself as creative, kind

and joyful. She sincerely loves the energy children bring into her life and is grateful for their company (CA, 3). Embracing the energy of children is especially important for Casey, due to an illness experienced during her junior year, which put her life in danger. Casey disclosed at the beginning of the semester she never had the opportunity to truly learn social studies and retain the information, because of the methods she was exposed to as a student (CA, 2). Through the methodology course, she wanted to gain skills on how to make social studies content engaging and lend itself to high levels of retention. She wanted to learn how to integrate social studies content throughout her daily routine. At this point in her preservice coursework, Casey was still unclear as to what is the “most important social studies content to teach to elementary students” (CA, 2). She craves to create peaceful and productive learning environments in her future classroom. She states, “I want to offer love and light for all the students that need it” (AR).

**Angie.** Patient, loving, and friendly are how Angie described herself (CA, 3). At the beginning of the semester, Angie shared she is not a “real fan” of history; it scared her (as content) when she was a child (CA, 2). Learning directly about people dying in mass through war or plague gave her nightmares. With this as her foundation in social studies, she was eager to acquire new methods in order to avoid repeating these conditions for her future students. She entered into the class with a real fear for social studies material and by the end of the semester, she wanted to become more comfortable learning how to teach social studies. Her ultimate goal was to learn how to integrate social studies across all content areas. She feels blessed to have found teaching and hopes the preparation she is receiving through the teacher education program will dismay the fears she has for the



“unknown” which lies in front of her (CA, 2). Angie craves support and guidance and feels it provides her the structure and confidence she needs to gain the skills to be a successful teacher in the future.

**Adrienne.** Adrienne described herself as strong, smart, persistent, and filled with a loving heart (CA, 3). Adrienne’s primary goal in this course was to learn how to make history personal for her students. She wants students to “involve themselves in history” and engage in critical thinking about their legacy (CA, 2). Ultimately, Adrienne felt hopeful and conflicted in regard to the future of education and her role in the classroom, she desperately wants to be inclusive but needs guidance on how to make this a reality in her professional practice (AR). One of her greatest concerns in relation to teaching social studies is actually finding the time to instruct all of the mandated standards (CA, 2). With so much to teach, she was unsure on the depth of content exploration she could venture with elementary students. She has a strong drive and feels failure on a profound level, which could inhibit her ability to take risks in the classroom.

### **Procedures**

Morine-Dershimer and Corrigan (1997) suggest four conditions should be created in order to facilitate change in an individual: time, dialogue, practice, and support. These four conditions were present in this study in that the 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 in relation to the role social justice plays in social studies education.

As the primary teacher-researcher, I facilitated experiences 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, 1997). 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). I distinctly implemented and modeled the use of experiential education methods (i.e. team building activities, outdoor education, problem-based learning) to foster classroom community under the framework of Carver’s (1996) theory of experiential education coupled with Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) pedagogical dilemmas in my lesson planning and implementation of course content.

One of the advantages of utilizing a case study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1985) to explore this issue is the close collaboration that developed between myself (the researcher) and the participants, which enabled students to tell their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Through these stories, students were able to describe their views and personal reality; which enabled me to better understand the participants’ actions and their social justice development within the context of social studies education (Lather, 1992).

### **Evaluator Positionality**

It was imperative my positionality remained in the forefront of the study. Personal and professional involvement in the field of social studies education for the past twenty years served as the foundation in order to facilitate social studies lessons focused on social justice. My 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. I aimed to identify and capitalize on unstructured teachable moments. Lastly, I intended to be mindful of my own biases and pre-conceived notions, and how they might influence the students.

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). As the primary researcher, I inevitably had more authority than my participants and so I continually returned to questions of power, control, and fairness in each stage of the research process. Social justice research stresses I am extremely clear about my position, power, and privilege. As a white, Jewish, woman, I bring distinct experiences and ways of knowing to this study. Through this study, I aimed to be reflexive in order to conceptualize how my identity and positionality interacts with the positionality of the preservice teachers in this study. By being reflexive with the research and data, I hoped to be able to think about why I made choices in the research study and also how I came to make these decisions and the corresponding impact on the analysis.

Ultimately, I aspired for students to move beyond a basic understanding the social problems that we study in order to become informed citizens capable of assessing problems and thinking about creative and realistic solutions. To focus on student learning, in a holistic way that draws on their personal history and experience, I designed educational components that not only addressed the students' cognitive needs but the lived realities of their physical selves. With this focus, I aimed to be a model, which can facilitate students' learning processes while also using their individualized knowledge as a starting point for experiencing course content.

### **Assumptions**

Based on the objectives of the elementary social studies methodology course in this study, which focused on the implementation of experiential teaching techniques and fundamental strategies to teach for social justice, I anticipated the preservice teachers would gain valuable tools from the course. It was possible that they would change their understanding of concepts and perspectives regarding elementary social studies curriculum. I also assumed their learning from the methodology course might not directly transfer into their actual practicum assignment. I assumed the variables within their particular practicum would affect how and what they would teach. Knowing that their cooperating teacher and supervisor would evaluate them, they did not have autonomy to choose everything they would have liked to teach during the practicum assignment.

### **Data Collection**

Data were principally derived from class assignments, interviews, discussions,

observer notes, logs, and weekly journal reflections. The conversations and reflections with the entire class were recorded digitally. Field notes, observations, and digital recordings were written down as narrations and analyzed. Table 3 outlines the research questions and data sources used to answer each question.

### **Class Assignments**

There were three data items obtained from the students through assignments and in-class activities over the semester. All of these data items aligned to the objectives and outcomes for the course (see Appendix A). For example, one of the class assignments (CA) had students develop a lesson that utilized experiential methods to teach for social justice in an elementary social studies context (CA1). A second assignment had students complete Quick Write Reflection Statements and one Little Book Reflection (high adventure activity) at the end of each class period (CA2). In the third assignment, students created an individual Bio Poem (see Appendix B) exploring their personal identity (CA3).

I led a different activity each week that encouraged discussion of concepts related to teaching for social justice. More importantly, there were only nine weeks in which to explore topics that could have easily taken up an entire semester. As discussed in the literature review, teaching for social justice is often introduced using the add-on approach, which functions to disconnect the concepts explored from their practical application in everyday situations. This topic will be discussed more in depth in the Conclusion chapter where I make recommendations for the inclusion of social justice in teacher preparation programs.

Table 3

*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 (CA2) Little Books (CA2) Textbook Evaluation (CA2) Field Notes (RJ) Audio Recordings (AR) Interviews (I)
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 (CA2) Little Books (CA2) Field Notes (RJ) Audio Recordings (AR) Interview (I)
2. In what ways did preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum classroom?	Lesson Plan Delivery and Written Reflection (CA1) Audio Recordings (AR) Field Notes (RJ) Interview (I)

**Interviews**

Interactive interviews (I) were administered at the finish of the semester with all seven participants. Interview questions (see Appendix C) covered a range of topics focused on understanding social justice and teaching within the discipline of social studies education. For a study of this nature, semistructured interviews are the most popular method to collect data (Creswell, 1994). In this type of interview, the researcher generates topics to investigate, while remaining open to following topics the student raises. Interactive interviews support the student to open up and express their lived experience (Mosselson, 2010). All interviews were coded to safeguard each student's identity.

### **Teacher as Researcher Observations**

I relied heavily on student/participant observation, which is noted as “a uniquely humanistic, interpretive approach” to research as contrasted with traditional quantitative forms (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 249). Student/participant observation, although not without its limitations recognizes that “we cannot study the social world without being a part of it” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 249). Further, participant observation enables the researcher to be part of “a shared social world” with their participants (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 256). As a member of the learning community, it was important to me to take a humanistic approach to my research that did not create a separation between my role as a member of the community and my role as a researcher.

One of the issues I faced as a teacher-observer (TO) was balancing my role as a facilitator with my role as an observer. As Green and Bloome (2004) note, it is “inherently complicated and dynamic as the participant observer seeks to at once participate as a member of a group and critically observe the ways in which the participants perceive, make meaning of, and reproduce the interactions that define the group over time” (p. 148).

### **Reflective Journals**

Eyler’s (2009) research on reflection maps, journal entries, and guided prompts were the basis for the journal assignments. Reflective journals (RFJ) are defined as “written documents that students create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness

and learning” (Thorpe, 2004, p. 328). For example, students might have to respond to the following questions, based on Dover’s (2013) study with secondary language arts teachers.

1. How would you describe “teaching for social justice” to a fellow teacher or administrator (Dover, 2013)?
2. How did you balance the goals of teaching for social justice (based on your description) with your practicum school’s teaching requirements and vision?
3. What challenges or supports did you face when teaching for social justice in your practicum experience?

The journaling process was an important component of the project not only because it pushes the students to be reflexive during the learning process, but also gives voice to the students (Mulvihill, Swaminatha, & Bailey, 2015). Further, it provided me with a way to cross-reference my own observations and perceptions about the experiences of the learning community.

### **Researcher Journal**

A researcher journal (RJ; Merriam, 1998) was kept for logging weekly memos regarding the progression of the course and interpretations of the students’ progress as well as my conceptualization of social justice, preservice teacher education and social studies methodology. This journal served as a mechanism to note questions, do initial analysis, and to connect the topics of study (Moore, 2008).

### **Audio Recordings**

Audio recordings (AR) are intended to be objective accounts of everything that was said and done during a particular class session with the distinct purpose to provide



context during the data analysis. Comments of non-participants were not included in the transcription process. Recording of verbal interactions in natural settings and targeted analysis of transcripts as records of conversation allowed for a collaborative construction of conversation to pinpoint overarching themes (Krippendorff, 2004).

### **Data Analysis**

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, 1995). Categories were related to my conceptual framework based on the literature. Each data source was viewed as one piece of a puzzle, each piece adding to my 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).

### **Ethical Issues**

Safeguards were taken to ensure the completion of this study. First, I gained approval from the University Institutional Review Board. Second, consent forms were distributed to all participants. Third, the analysis of interview transcripts, lesson plans and classroom observations were conducted at the completion of the semester and after final grades were submitted. Last, significant thought was placed into the strategies and

methods enacted and activities chosen to ensure participants felt safe emotionally, physically, and intellectually when participating in the study.

### **Validity**

I find the crystalline metaphor (Richardson, 1997) resonates with me in addressing validity in this study. “Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know” (Richardson, 1997, p. 92). The notion of viewing a study and its corresponding data from multiple perspectives and angles will allow me, as the researcher, to engage with the research by “discovery, seeing, telling, storying, and re-presentation” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 208). Using a variety of data sources, prolonged engagement with the students, member checking from colleagues, and peer debriefing with study participants bolstered the validity and triangulation of the data stated in the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

In order to increase the dependability of this study, the aim was to stay in the study long enough, observe carefully, make reflective notes, and utilize multiple data sources (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Specifically, dependability was increased in this study because, the researcher was the teacher, and I participated in the class activities and made authentic observations of experiences.

### **Limitations**

Using one researcher can be regarded as a weakness in the objectivity of this research study. One the other hand, the teacher-researcher acting as the classroom teacher

knows the culture, backgrounds, problems and strengths of the participants. Another weakness of the study was it was difficult to record copious amounts of data while in the midst of an activity or lesson. Being sure to consistently use digital recording devices during activities mitigated this limitation. Using an outside researcher during the classroom observations could have potentially increased the validity because as the teacher-researcher I could have become socially or emotionally too close to the participants (Karppinen, 2012).

While researcher bias can be considered a limitation in qualitative research, Richardson (1997) notes subjective perspectives can be valuable to the research as they often result in a more profound exploration of the data. I am personally committed to social justice education as well as teaching experientially and believe that this position brought me not only a great deal of investment in this research project but also immense enjoyment in carrying it out. In this case, I consider my bias more of an advantage than a limitation.

Central to the study's limitations was preservice teachers lacked sustained experiences in the "real classroom," so their depth of understanding and lived experience in lesson execution and curriculum development was limited. This could have impacted the quality or quantity of data collected.

Yin (2003) describes the limitations of a qualitative case study by pointing out that it is challenging to generalize between cases. Nevertheless, no number of cases, regardless of size, is likely to address the primary focus for a particular study adequately. Thus, the major limitation of this study lies in the inability to generalize it to a larger

population or even to other cases.

### **Summary**

A paramount goal of this research study was to provide a better understanding of how elementary preservice teachers conceptualize and operationalize teaching for social justice in a social studies context. This study was anticipated to raise understanding and generate conversation on teaching methods preservice teachers could utilize to provide equitable opportunities for all students (Jenks et al., 2001). In this chapter, a review of the distinct methods developed to conduct this study was presented and supported by current literature (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1985).

## CHAPTER IV

### EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING—BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

*One of my first goals in the classroom is to get to know the students individually and to work on building community. This is pedagogically significant in classrooms where I employ experiential learning because these “experiences” often involve collaborative work, dialogue, or self-disclosure that requires a trusting classroom environment.*

(Peters, 2012, p. 221)

This study was based on my 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. As the data will show, the ability to transfer learned methodology practices in the practicum classroom was complex and a challenging road for the seven preservice teachers. Although the preservice teachers in the methodology course increased their agency and competence to deliver experiential lessons and built a sense of belonging amongst themselves, which proved to be instrumental in their professional and personal growth, they were not able to sustain their agency or competence to build learning communities within their practicum classroom.

In the following three chapters, findings from the data collection are reported and organized according to the student’s conceptualization and operationalization of experiential learning, teaching for social justice through learning communities. Also

discussed are professional models and support preservice teachers need to implement social justice experiential practices in the formal classroom setting.

### **Initial Preparation**

Building community within a classroom context begins the first moment students step into the learning environment and as the instructor I play a primary role in that process. From the early stages of formatting the syllabus, embedding deliberate experiential community building activities such as icebreakers and problem-solving initiatives, theoretical discussions, and adventure education, I envisioned the path I was hoping students would take to build an effective learning community. Two major goals in the initial preparation phase was designing the delivery of course content to expose students to experiential methods (Carver, 1996) and entrench them in conceptualizing teaching for social justice (Picower, 2012).

Morine-Dershimer and Corrigan's (1997) four conditions to facilitate change in an individual were utilized as a guide in the creation of materials and methodology development for the course. I focused on time (providing substantial time for experiential activities in each class period to build trust and a sense of belonging), dialogue (discussions based on theory and personal experience), practice (students presenting experiential activities to their peers to gain competence), and support (applicable feedback and guidance to aid in practicum implementation) starting with the first class meeting.

To strengthen the foundation for each student's connection with the learning

community, I aimed to create a forum for the purposeful sharing of ideas through the activities I taught and modeled each week. The success in creating communal connections to enhance the effectiveness to teach for social justice is predicated on the use of experiential activities (Adams, 2016). However, this success is inherently dependent on my ability to present the effective introduction and background knowledge and the subsequent debriefing and reflection on each activity we underwent as a class. I considered these points deeply in the construction of the course outline and materials. Ultimately, I 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 (National Council of the Social Studies [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.

### **Setting the Tone**

As I looked out at the students assembled around the classroom for the first class meeting, I was thinking, “Who are these students? What lies underneath the surface superficialities? What words should I use to greet the students of this course?” (RJ). Even

after teaching in the k-12 environment for over twenty years and collegiately for eight years, I still find myself filled with nervous jitters on the first day of class. “Would the students want to engage in experiential methods? Are they looking at me and wonder WHY I am so passionate about social justice?” And then as it always happens, I feel my left eye begins to drift, wiggle, and move out of place” (RJ). My vulnerability creeps into my thoughts, but I must remain confident despite my weaknesses, I recall thinking (RJ). Strategically, I lightened my nerves by inviting the students to join me outside for icebreakers and tone setting activities, so we could begin building our community.

The first class was built upon the initial practices of building a learning community experientially in a social studies context. Specifically, learning introductory information about each person, creating classroom norms and defining guiding terms such as experiential learning, community, social justice and social studies were central to constructing the foundation to move forward with multifaceted curriculum and methods. The grassy field outside of the education building was where I chose to lead the class through icebreakers such as State Handshakes, Partner Name Tag (Rohnke, 1984), and Ancient Heroes (RJ). We dove into the introductions and learned of the eclectic mix of majors, minors, and endorsements being pursued by each classmate.

### **Creating Norms**

Creating a full value contract (FVC) was a strategic activity the preservice teachers participated in on the first day of class, where we, as a class, set norms and expectations for working together as a community. The following norms were decided upon: bring a different point of view, help each other with projects, positive attitude and



willingness to share, actively contribute ideas and examples, teamwork, be friends with all classmates, demonstrate positivity and respect, remain optimistic and display a nonjudgmental attitude, always being willing to do your best, and last value each class member (TO). These norms served as a guide throughout the semester in class and within the practicum setting for the preservice teachers as we encountered challenging activities and discussions.

At the conclusion of the semester, several participants commented how they utilized the full value contract within their practicum classroom because it opened the conversation to communal rules and expectations. “It isn’t the teacher laying down the law; the students create the contract together” (Angie, I).

### **Conceptualizations of Experiential Learning**

Throughout the semester, I deliberately structured activities to guide students in developing their understanding of experiential learning theory and methods through specific course readings from D. A. 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. As the semester unfolded, it became evident that even though the preservice teachers were upbeat about implementing diverse methods and enjoyed learning themselves experientially, there proved to be a disconnect in what teaching experientially *really meant and looked like* in the practicum setting.

## Initial Conceptualizations

From the beginning of the semester, the preservice teachers in this study were idealistic and cautiously optimistic about their understanding of experiential methodology. Each of the participants was seeking methods to bring learning alive and help students dig deeper into content connections (CA2, TO) and experiential learning resonated with their innate desire to bring *learning alive*. Hayli explained she wants to teach in a way that “sparks the children’s interest and pushes them to dive into subject matter even further” (I), but questioned if elementary students had the cognitive ability to dive deep into social studies content. She was unclear on how to push them to heightened state of discourse; she expressed that experiential learning could potentially be a tool to guide students in this direction (RFJ). Adrienne who truly wanted to commit to “straying away from rote memorization techniques” and teach in an experiential fashion echoed these sentiments (RFJ). She viewed teaching experientially as a challenge, unlike other participants who approached these methods with apprehension and nervousness (TO). For example, Megan had a difficult time seeing the applicability of experiential activities with special education students,

It has been hard to think about how to use experiential methods with my special education students. It seems like sometimes it messes up their learning processes more than actually benefiting from it. But, it could be these students receive the majority of their learning through direct instruction, and so I would like to experiment (I).

Fully conceptualizing what IS experiential education was challenging for several of the preservice teachers. These misconceptions could be linked to the preservice teacher’s ability to define experiential learning. To gauge the level of experiential

methodology conceptualization, the participants were asked to describe how they would define experiential education to a colleague (CA2). Based on their responses, all of the participants seemed to have gained core knowledge of experiential methodology but found difficulty in forming a personal definition. The preservice teachers focused on words to describe experiential learning, such as hands-on, minds-on, active learning, reflection and student-guided learning (I, RJ). Specifically, Casey defined experiential education as:

It is something where students aren't told what to do and how to do it, but through probing, students can discover for themselves content connections. They are in charge of their learning and they have the power to experiment with materials given to them without being told how to do it or what it is supposed to be (I).

Nicole focused her definition on a break from traditional methods of teaching and learning, "it is all about the student putting forth effort to learn in ways other than doing worksheets or reading books" (I). Each participant's conceptualization based on their definition of experiential learning was influential in guiding their lesson planning and delivery during the practicum experience.

### **Practicum Conceptualizations**

The preservice teachers in this study demonstrated a disconnect between their internal desire to teach experientially (i.e., "make learning come alive") and their actual ability to teach in an experiential fashion within the practicum. Interpreting experiential learning as taking the students outside one afternoon to sit in a circle in the grass or guide class discussions seemed to provide comfort in an unknown methodology during the practicum assignment (RFJ, TO). Mellaina's experiential lesson in her practicum was

grounded in students using technology to learn Civil War concepts (CA1). Specifically, the students built electronic sentence strips to recite the Gettysburg address,

I believe computers can be a great tool for experiential education. If you have a good source for the students to use, they can be totally independent in their research. I believe that experiential education means minds on learning. I don't necessarily like the term hands on, because I don't think it always has to be a physical thing (I).

This misconception was also present in Megan's reflection, as she felt leading a class discussion satisfied the experiential requirement. "So, we had a discussion of how people are different and not to be afraid of different people. I think this was the best part of my experiential lesson" (I). Megan did try to embed teaching for social justice in this discussion though, which will be discussed more in depth in the next chapter.

As soon to be elementary teachers, several of the preservice teachers worried younger students would not be able to fully participate in experiential activities due to lower cognitive and physical development or current maturity level (RFJ). Because of this fear, Casey's conceptualization of teaching experiential activities was based on the "easier" or "fun" games. She still hoped to engage students in meaningful conversations or harder problem-solving activities, but was concerned about classroom management, because of the age of the students (RFJ).

### **Operationalizing Actions**

As I thought about the practice and support conditions (Morine-Dersheimer & Corrigan, 1997) needed to set the preservice teachers up for optimal success with their experiential methods practicum lesson plan, I included in each class session activities

such as Diversity Action Wheel, 9/11 Shoes, and Social Justice Name Drop (Rohnke, 1984) to model how to teach experientially with a social justice mindset (RFJ). The act of demonstrating these activities for the preservice teachers was a chief contributor to their ability to operationalize experiential lessons and methods in the practicum setting.

By deliberately structuring experiential activities in each class meeting, my hope was the students would embrace the methodology and begin to build their agency to deliver experiential lessons in the future classrooms (RJ). Based on my observations and interview responses, over the course of the semester, the students steadily increased their agency with experiential methods due to our learning community.

The preservice teachers felt teaching experientially could help students work together as a whole unit, not just 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 (TO). 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, I).

Coupled with this optimism, many were appreciative of the methodology class. As Nicole noted, “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” (I). “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” (Angie, I). 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” (Megan, I).

The preservice teachers were grateful to the community that was created through our class, “Just to have shared experiences, from the hike to the little activities at the beginning of lessons, we became good friends. Even now that the semester is over, many of us still communicate about lesson planning, cooperating teacher issues or curriculum, because the methods class cemented our relationships” (Mellaina, I). “I feel like our class got closer because of the teambuilding activities” (Nicole, I). She expressed how it helped the class get to know each other, which is important, because those moments are few and far between due to stringent academic expectations felt in other classes.

Although, even after such a positive in class experience, as I analyzed the data, it became evident there were distinct obstacles to their success, such as adequate instructional time, absent collegial support and a lack of confidence in teaching ability. These distinctive obstacles will be discussed in chapter six and seven.

### **Operationalizing Experiential Actions in the Practicum**

The participants operationalized teaching experientially in the practicum through a variety of ways. The majority of the preservice teachers reproduced activities they had learned in the methodology class and two teachers spread their wings to attempt

to teach their own derived experiential activities. Students felt it was easier to begin “small and low key” (Megan, I) with rudimentary infusion of experiential activities into the traditional classroom setting.

Three of the participants discussed the use of the Full Value Contract to set norms and expectations within the class, as this was modeled at the beginning of the semester in the methodology course. The “getting to know you” activities seem “fun and easy to implement” according to one preservice teacher (Hayli, I). Using entry-level experiential activities was safer in the eyes of the preservice teachers. “I know I don’t want to stick out like a sore thumb and go in there and teach experientially, when no one else does” (Adrienne, I). Adrienne’s experiential lesson involved students deciphering artifacts and hypothesizing on the different uses of the objects, “I think it was a good team builder for the groups, because they liked working and together to help them understand what archeologists do. I also felt like this was an experiential activity that didn’t seem scary” (CA2).

Three of the preservice teachers took a greater experiential risk and utilized and adapted the Web of Connections activity (see Figure 4) to meet the specific needs of their applicable student population. The students who used this activity within their practicum felt it truly helped students make connections with specified content and each other. Nicole used the Web of Connections activity within her fourth-grade practicum class. She chose to use the activity to demonstrate the connections within an ecosystem and the impact of humans on specific ecosystems. “It was such a powerful visual!” (I). Hayli’s use of the Web of Connections activity was much different than Nicole’s by focusing on



*Figure 4. Web of connections (photo by Project Adventure).*

teaching for social justice concepts, specifically Picower's (2012) element one—self-love and knowledge. Hayli described her use of the web.

We discussed the people and different cultures that are in our communities. Next, each child was given an index card and was directed to write one thing that is unique about them. As we sat in a circle on the floor, we created a web with yarn as we tossed the ball of yarn to someone that we had a connection with according to what they wrote on their card. It was a very heartwarming activity to see the students make a connection with someone in the classroom. The best moment was at the end of the activity as we sat and held onto our classroom web I asked the students what this web could represent? One little girl raised her hand and said even though we all are different; we all have things in common too (CA1).

The Web of Connections activity is formidable, because of the intense visual representation the activity creates. “It was physical, tactile, we actively influenced each other through our actions and we could immediately see how one action can impact our community” (Nicole, I).



### **Building Learning Community Through Experiential Methods**

To enhance the conceptualization of experiential learning to build a learning community within the methodology class, I delivered direct problem-solving initiatives, such as Traffic Jam or Web of Connections, to put students in situations where they had to use skills such as strategic brainstorming, compromise, and conflict resolution to make decisions actively. These activities proved to be critical in the development of our learning community.

We didn't know each other at the beginning of the semester and participating in all of the experiential activities; we were able to get to know each other on a deeper level. You know, doing these activities—playing with people, really helps you learn about each other, how you will react in a certain situation or how someone treats others. I feel these activities helped us grow closer as a class—we were more willing to share our opinions, more willing to go out on a limb and share what we actually feel. People felt less targeted for their ideas. (Hayli, I).

During the post-practicum interview, I asked the preservice teachers which specific experiential activity resonated with them the most from the methodology class.

Overwhelmingly, the participants shared the Web of Connections was their top choice, because of the heightened level of participation needed from each person to complete the activity and the adaptability of the lesson. “The Web activity made visible connections in the circle of students. There are so many variations on this activity too—ways to teach about community. When we lifted up Hayli at the end [on the web], we could see how strong it is when we are all working together!” (Angie, I). It would seem experiential activities with an action-orientated focus, a “wow” at the conclusion of the lesson or a powerful visual were most attractive to the teachers coupled with the ability to utilize an activity across numerous grade levels.

Crafting experiential activities that promote belonging among students and create a strong sense of community were equally important. In order to achieve this, I infused an adventure education component to the course as well. The intense emotions associated with higher risk activities coupled with the need to depend on others are benefits of adventure education activities (RFJ) when combined with other experiential methods. Specifically, for the fifth session, the class hiked up the Wind Caves in Logan Canyon (see Figure 5).

Described as “a 3.5 out and back trail with beautiful flowers, steep grades and rewarding views,” the Wind Caves hike served as the mechanism to provide a higher risk activity. The preservice teachers overwhelmingly enjoyed the hike up to the Wind Caves



*Figure 5.* Wind caves hike.

and felt this was one of the most powerful experiential activities we participated in as a class (I). Mellaina noted in her Little Book, “It was such a powerful way for us to build class community” (CA2). Megan’s reflection echoed this point, “being “outside” with students helped break down perceived cliques in class. You forget about those exterior connections and begin to build relationships in very different ways” (CA2). On this hike, a few students had noticeable difficulty, but when debriefing at the summit, it was obvious the hike had the intended impact I had hoped for. “Oh man, that hike was steep! Sometimes I felt like I wouldn’t make it, but I pushed through and made it up. It’s so beautiful and it was nice never to feel judged by my classmates” (Angie, I).

Even though the preservice teachers loved the idea of taking kids “out,” Adrienne couldn’t imagine juggling the liability or all of the health issues children have these days” (I). This fear or lack of confidence in her own ability or others perceptions was a common theme among the preservice teachers even though they believed in the methodology to teach content.

Teaching experientially or being an active participant in a lesson, allowed for the content to “stick” or have greater resonance, Nicole commented (CA2). Participating in experiential lessons within the methodology course helped her become a better person and connect lessons to other topics/issues within and outside of social studies (RFJ). Experiential learning creates a deep resonance within who you are as a person, because you “experienced it directly, you don’t have just to visualize what the process will look like, because you truly experienced it. It helped me be a better person and to be able to help others in similar situations” (Nicole, I).

Nicole also was adamant that participating in the experiential activities made her and others feel vulnerable. For example, in the Name Drop activity, when the blanket dropped, it was all on you. “But, this pushed me to stretch myself and I learned I could put myself out there and it will be ok...it is ok to be honest with ourselves” (Nicole, I). This was a critical realization for Nicole, as “putting herself out there” was a critical step in gaining the confidence to teach experientially.

This was a key conceptualization for Nicole on the Wind Caves Hike in regards to bringing experiential methods into her future classroom. “Getting to the top was just like a typical classroom...there were students scared of heights, some who liked going right to the edge, some climbing the cliffs...it was rewarding and we learned a lot. I will take my future students on field trips like this to bring these attributes to the forefront” (CA2).

About their own direct experience in the methodology class, many students commented how the hike to the Wind Caves was by far their “favorite.” It expanded learning outside of the four walls of the classroom, provided a mechanism to support others with a hard task, and create connections among students that transferred to other classes and life experiences. Mellaina commented, “Having the opportunity to have an outdoor experiential lesson with our methods class was so powerful in building our sense of community and I didn’t think I would have a chance to do something like that in one of my education classes” (I).

### **Confidence**

The confidence to teach experientially and dive into teaching for social justice

varied among the seven preservice teachers in their practicum assignments. Casey appreciated the ability to “try teaching experientially”, even though her practicum placement did not support this kind of “creative lesson planning” or “community building” she had hoped for (I). Casey felt comfortable taking these “experiential risks” even though she knew she wouldn’t be perfect, because she wanted to try in a practicum setting, which she felt was “safer” than within her first year teaching (I). Mellaina’s confidence in her ability to use of experiential methods was the most positive of all the preservice teachers in this study. Her comfort in “not knowing it all” and willingness to make mistakes and ask for help was instrumental in her positive mindset. She reflected on how her lesson planning and delivery could be “more experiential” and was linked to her level of preparedness (mentally and in practicality). Angie was motivated by our class activities but also was the most fearful. “Teaching experientially scared me, because I didn’t know if I could do it. I wanted to teach in this way so badly, but I didn’t feel experienced enough to go out and do it” (I).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the findings validate that the preservice teachers increased their agency and competence to deliver experiential lessons and built a strong sense of belonging amongst themselves, which proved to be instrumental in their professional and personal growth. However, they were not able to sustain their agency or bolster their competence to deliver experiential lessons within their practicum classroom. Ultimately, the desire for professional acceptance within the practicum environment was paramount

over personal agency and in turn stifled the preservice teacher's competence with experiential methodology.

Including experiential activities into the methodology course promoted unique engagement with social studies content, experiential methodology and learning communities to teach for social justice, which was novel for the preservice teachers. Beyond the novelty of the exposure to new teaching methodologies, the preservice teachers increased their agency to implement experiential lessons through deliberate coursework. This was evident through a shared sense of belonging to the class community and demonstrated competence with innovative methods. Moreover, the realization in their professional ability to implement experiential lessons with fidelity increased their agency to try novel experiential methods in the practicum setting. The intense communal connections built with experiential methodology created an atmosphere of belonging, where students were willing to take risks, share, discuss and problem-solve together social justice issues together. The connections built through the development of the learning community also provided the foundation for the preservice teachers to develop competence with experiential methods, because there was an atmosphere of trust and acceptance in learning to become a teacher.

## CHAPTER V

### BUILDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO TEACH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

*If we want to create a classroom community that values idealism, human connection, and real, in-depth learning, we will have to create it ourselves.*  
(Block, 2009).

Teaching preservice teachers how to teach for social justice, while building a learning community through experiential means must be a deliberate guided process by the course facilitator. Again, I utilized, Morine-Dersheimer and Corrigan's (1997) four conditions to facilitate change in an individual as a guide in the purposeful development of a class community to teach for social justice in my lesson planning. I focused on time (providing substantial time to create community), dialogue (through discussions about teaching for social justice in a communal atmosphere), practice (students *actually* teaching social justice focused activities to their peers), and support (applicable feedback and guidance to aid in practicum implementation) starting with the first class meeting (RJ). In combination with the four conditions outlined above, Carver's (1996) ABC's of Student Experience was central in my preparation of course content and activities, aiming for students to share a sense of belonging to each other, the course and our experiences.

As I reflect back on what factors provided me the ability to heighten student engagement, connection to the content and create a space where students had the chance to voice their opinions about social justice issues, I recall an atmosphere of trust, support and compassion fused with active learning experiences that brought the class together as a community (RJ). Orchestrating and leading activities such as Social Justice Name Drop, Traffic Jam, and Stepping Stones promoted opportunities to build our community (RJ).

In this chapter, findings from the data collection are reported and organized according to students' conceptualization and operationalization of building learning communities to teach for social justice. Overall, the preservice teachers found creating learning communities to be an effective tool to teach for social justice. Although, despite the growth and creation of a sense of belonging and the preservice teacher's direct involvement in lessons to learn how to build a learning community, the majority of the participants in this study were unable to operationalize their acquired skills in the practicum classroom. The data revealed the difficulty in forming learning communities in the practicum classroom could be due to diminished agency on the part of the preservice teacher, minimal support from the cooperating teacher or a lack of competence, such as effective classroom management or possessing strategies to teach for social justice.

### **Conceptualizations of Social Justice**

#### **Defining Teaching for Social Justice**

To gauge the level of student conceptualization to building communities to teach for social justice, the participants were asked to describe how they would define teaching for social justice to a colleague (CA2). I felt gaining a sense of each preservice teacher's definition would be beneficial, because this seemed to be where the students asked for greatest clarification throughout the semester (RJ, TO). Based on the participant responses, they were able to formulate a personal definition of teaching for social justice, that eluded a connection to Picower's (2012) more advanced elements to teaching for social justice like social movements and social change or awareness raising or "teaching



for fairness” for example (TO).

Creating rudimentary definitions like “teaching for fairness” was the extent of several of the preservice teacher’s conceptualizations. The preservice teacher’s difficulty in expanding their definition of teaching for social justice could be attributed to their lack of exposure to diverse or social justice based terminology or standards before the methodology class. Four of the preservice teachers had never heard the term social justice before the social studies methodology course. During the interviews I found myself needing to clarify what does teaching for social justice mean many times—referring to their previous diversity courses to help the students pinpoint a definition (RJ). This confusion could be attributed to the infusion of social justice ideology into social studies content, which was new for all but one of the preservice teachers or the lack of exposure to the general ideology (I). Six of the participants recalled a diversity course where social justice issues were discussed, but the actual term *social justice* was not used (I). Megan commented she felt there was a need to teach for social justice based on her experience, but it had been left out of the elementary curriculum. “We haven’t been taught how to talk about it” (Megan, I). Megan’s personal experience highlights her feelings of missing out on important curricular issues throughout her coursework, which impacts her ability and confidence to tackle social justice matters in the classroom.

### **Social Studies Foundation**

During the second methodology class meeting, the students were assigned the task of drawing a picture of an ideal social studies student; the student drew in the picture portrayed a social studies “graduate,” a student who had spent a year learning social

studies content (RJ). Forecasting outcomes for students can be a powerful activity for preservice teachers because it helps them “see the end in mind” and start conversations of how to achieve specific outcomes. I wanted the students to begin to make connections between traditional social studies content and teaching for social justice. Drawings from the preservice teachers depicted pictures and captions such as, “Off to the soup kitchen” and “I Love Equality!” (TO). Specifically, these captions are indicators the preservice teachers aim to create students who are moved to participate in social action, a basic element of teaching for social justice (Picower, 2012). The preservice teachers were on their way to understanding that learning social studies content is a gateway to building a social justice mindset. “It is important students learn how to take a stand and do what is right—standing up for others, voicing their opinion and voting. Social studies lessons can help you reach these outcomes as a teacher,” Casey stated in the activity debrief (AR). Hayli shared in the discussion following the activity, she wants the students she interacts with to “crave learning about things that matter and are affecting the world and communities in which they live” and she questioned how learning social studies coupled with social justice could impact students’ choices in school, at home and within a larger community context (AR). Even with a current educational climate where teaching social studies is often overlooked and viewed as a non-essential subject (RJ), the debrief revealed a deep commitment among the preservice teachers to not fall pray to “eliminating social studies” (AR) from their future classrooms.

Social studies is a subject that often gets put on the back burner, because it is not a mandated, standardized tested subject. But, social studies can help students find their place in the world while building their appreciation of people around the planet (AR).

The strong commitment expressed to teach social studies is a critical link to effectively understanding how to teach for social justice within a community context, because many of the overarching tenants are shared seamlessly between social studies and social justice. Megan strongly felt teaching core community skills is beneficial for society at large. “It is so important to teach core community/social skills, because those are the skills that put students far in life. That is why putting those social justice ideas, social skills into social studies are what is going to help them and to better our communities, better our country in general” (I). The deliberate blend of social studies content and teaching for social justice provided a gateway to help the preservice teachers conceptualize their responsibility to teach for social justice.

### **Social Justice Teaching Responsibility**

One of the weekly journal reflections explicitly asked the preservice teachers to respond to the following prompt: *What is your responsibility as an educator in challenging societal stereotypes or providing a greater understanding of social justice issues to students?* Vastly, the preservice teachers felt a professional responsibility to teach for social justice but were unsure if their current knowledge base would be sufficient to teach for social justice successfully and comprehensively. Several students noted this was due to a lack of exposure to social justice issues on a personal level and an over-reliance on social media to form opinions on social justice issues. “My sense of social justice and knowledge pool is primarily informed from what I hear from others—personal connections and social media” (Adrienne, RFJ). Mellaina found gathering accurate information about social justice issues “frustrating and difficult” as an

elementary preservice teacher (RFJ). Even with this deterrent, she was adamant it was the teacher's responsibility to "provide accurate information from multiple perspectives related to social justice issues. We can teach by example, as well as have conversations with our students about these issues" (Mellaina, RFJ).

Not all embraced the idea of taking responsibility to teach for social justice at the start of the semester. For example, Hayli didn't care much about seeking out social justice information at the beginning of the term, but after participating in the social studies methods course, her desire to be an "informed consumer of information" for herself and her future students emerged (RFJ).

It is up to me to open up children's eyes to multiple perspectives, whether I agree with the perspective or not. If we don't allow children to gain information from a variety of sources to base their decisions on issues in our community and the world around them, we are doing them a terrible disservice and create possible issues of hate and violence. (Hayli, RFJ).

Hayli's shift in perspective over the course of the semester focused on the desire to share information representing several perspectives and cultural ideologies. This resonated with other preservice teachers as well.

I want my students to have the chance to get information from multiple sources and viewpoints. It is so important for teachers to encourage students to think about their feelings of different groups of people and how social justice issues affect them. Most of all, we should educate our students on different cultures and traditions so they can be more completely aware of the world around them. We should instigate in them a desire to learn more about a situation without jumping right in with an opinion or judgment. (Megan, RFJ)

The preservice teachers in this study were conceptually ready to dive into teaching for social justice knowing it wouldn't be easy. "The only way students will become informed about social justice issues is if we as teachers are open to talking and teaching about

them, even it is uncomfortable” (Nicole, RFJ). However, even though the preservice teachers were committed to teaching for social justice throughout the methodology course, when it was time to operationalize social justice lessons in the practicum setting, their fears increased and competence to teach social justice issues decreased.

### **Conceptualizations of Building Community to Teach for Social Justice**

Each preservice teacher had their conceptualization of how and why to build a learning community to teach for social justice based on their individual 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. Casey expressed it was imperative to build communities to increase levels of trust and communication with the students to discuss historical events and current social studies topics (I). “The students must learn how their individual choices affect others around them in their communities” (Casey, I). Megan particularly noted, “It is up to me to give the students the education they need to be a productive and positive community member” (I). 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” (I). 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.

I can see myself wanting to build community within my classroom—it is such a fantastic way to get down to a personal level and set clear boundaries with students. Kids need to learn how to work together as a whole, not just as individuals. Learning to collaborate and give space for all student voices is important. (Angie, I)

The preservice teachers clearly understood the importance of creating learning communities to enhance the ability to teach for social justice. What was imperative to note though, was that the preservice teachers had the opportunity to generate and share learning experiences within a community as well to aid in the solidification of their conceptualizations to use learning communities to teach for social justice.

### **Methodology Class Learning Community**

Deliberately building a learning community within the methodology class provided the mechanism for the students to become unified and allowed me to model the techniques to build a sense of belonging in a classroom environment. I knew if I truly wanted the students to transfer their learning to a new environment—to have the ability to build their own learning communities in a future classroom, we would have to create a robust learning community of our own (RJ). In each class meeting, we participated in deliberate experiential activities to strengthen our community to create trusting relationships to discuss social justice topics.

During the fourth class meeting, our community had strengthened to a point I was ready to lead the students through the *Walking in Their Shoes* activity (RJ). This activity is significant for a learning community, because it addresses issues of religious toleration, understanding, compassion, and forgiveness in the backdrop of the 9/11 tragedies.

We were sitting in the front of the classroom in a circle, sharing our vulnerability

and fears after September 11<sup>th</sup> and one of our classmates starting crying... that had never happened to me before in any class. It was so powerful, talking about religion in school—we really had built an atmosphere of trust to be able to have that conversation. I want to create this atmosphere for my students. (Casey, I)

Nicole's powerful moment where she truly comprehended the capacity of our learning community was the *Walking in Their Shoes* activity as well.

It made me realize someone doesn't always have to be talking. Reflecting and pondering are really important in a lesson, especially in the experiential lessons where we are exploring social justice issues. As an older student, sitting in the circle going through the activity with my classmates, it really took me back to all those feelings I had when it first happened. It was a very emotional class for me. (Nicole, I)

The class underwent numerous activities that allowed the learning community to develop a sense of trust among all members. *Walking in Their Shoes* allowed students to build trust, practice compassion and active listening in the backdrop of a watershed moment.

Intentionally, I continued to structure activities to reinforce our learning community in order to enhance the space to teach for social justice. In the subsequent class, I led the students through *The Web of Connections* activity with the utmost goal to build trust. "The web solidified our class community. In order to build a close community, everyone needs to feel safe, for everyone to feel like they trust each other, to discuss social justice issues, everyone needs to feel support without tearing anyone down" (Casey, I). The web provided a tangible experience for our class to feel safe and create trust. Trust was a central point for several of the preservice teachers while building our community—trust among peers, creating a trusting environment and trusting they had the skills to be a successful teacher in future classrooms (TO).

The preservice teachers felt our class provided a realistic view of what being a

teacher is really like in the trenches in the backdrop of a supportive learning community.

“Our class was honest and real. I really appreciate the trust that developed with my classmates, so that we could have honest conversations in a strong community”

(Mellaina, I).

Building community in the classroom is what is going to make or break you as a teacher. If you don't have a decent community in the classroom, you can't manage the class as well and there is going to be instances of hurt feelings if you don't have a sense of community in the classroom. We need to create an environment of acceptance in the classroom where it is understood that we do not judge people and respect everyone's ideas and opinions. (Hayli, I)

This stance solidified over the course of the semester. Megan commented, “I have grown and gotten to know myself better because of the community in the methods class. My vision of what I want professionally has become clear, especially in relation to creating learning communities. I was impacted by moments in class that has shaped my perceptions of what students are capable of doing and discussing” (I). Nicole echoed these sentiments.

The methods class taught me much more than social studies methods or ways to teach for social justice. I learned that you could quickly grow to care about a group of people...as a teacher I can deliberately facilitate these experiences. The community is worth it; you can build it, you should build it, and I can't go back to thinking otherwise. No longer will I see a class as just students, but as human beings. I really want to make a difference in children's lives. I want to REALLY care about them and teach them content that matters. We have to teach hard things (I).

### **Practicum Conceptualizations of Learning Communities**

The practicum setting provided only two of the participants a chance to witness a learning community in action. As Mallenia reflected on her practicum, she noted how her



cooperating teacher had built a community foundation in the classroom, which led to effective discussions based on social justice concepts.

I was teaching in a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade classroom, and you could feel the community, the children and teachers really respected each other. The students knew not to make fun of each other about their ideas or opinions, so this allowed them to have deep conversations. I can see how taking the extra step of making the community a priority makes those discussions so much easier to have. (Mellaina, I)

Nicole echoed these sentiments based on what she experienced in her practicum classroom.

I think when you build community and when you teach children the importance of community and what that can look like, I think it creates a safe environment for kids to be able to express their ideas and feelings without feeling they will be judged harshly or made fun of because of what they believe (I).

Several of the preservice teachers did not share the observations that Mellaina and Nicole experienced about learning communities. Casey acutely saw the need for a supportive classroom community, because she watched, “children break down and cry, because of the classroom environment and its unfair practices” (I). She felt some of these issues could have been addressed by the use of experiential lessons to build community with a social justice focus (RFJ). Casey’s practicum experience was unique due to a poor relationship and lack of respect she held for the cooperating teacher in the classroom. “This teacher’s lack of social justice understanding and compassion for the students created a toxic classroom environment where teaching creative, student-directed lessons were difficult” (I). Even though Casey’s practicum experience was rare, because of a poor relationship with her cooperating teacher, several other participants who had positive relationships with their cooperating teacher did not observe a learning community in action either.

## **Operationalizing Actions**

Purposely building community among a cohort of students can foster the capacity for an educator to teach for social justice (Picower, 1007; Sto11, 2009). Ideally, when we are actively engaged with a group of learners, often the community will have the ability to take on greater physical, emotional or intellectual challenges, because of the intensified state of trust evident within the group. Eventually, I had hoped the seven participants in this study would have had the experience to build and participate in a learning community focused on social justice within the practicum setting (RJ). Although, when it came to operationalize their conceptualizations in the practicum classroom, their lessons lacked depth and hovered on Picower’s (2012) primary elements of teaching for social justice: self-love and knowledge and respecting others, which was in contradiction to their stated social justice teaching responsibility. The challenges to building a learning community to teach for social justice within the practicum classroom were due to several key factors—buy-in from cooperating teachers, adequate time to teach for social justice (for lesson execution and time committed to teaching social studies in general) and lack of competence to teach for social justice.

### **Practicum Lesson Execution**

Overwhelmingly, the preservice teachers focused their lesson development and delivery on Picower’s (2012) introductory elements to teaching for social justice. Activities and lessons with a focus on self-love and knowledge (element 1) and respect for others (element 2) were a much easier entry point to teaching for social justice. This

was a noticeable trend in their practicum lesson plans, which focused on students' personal communities and neighborhoods (RJ). For example, Mellaina's social justice experiential lesson concentrated on the students exploring how unique cultures influenced their classroom community as well as how their families and neighbor's cultures influence the neighborhood community (CA1). "The strength of this lesson was the conversation that took place amongst the students and the conversation was not expected" (Mellaina, I). She remembered the discussion among the students in which they shared being afraid of other cultures.

I used this opportunity to springboard into a discussion about discrimination and how our fears are often not grounded in fact. I wanted to be sure the students understood it does not help our society to be afraid of people who are different than themselves. (Mellaina, I)

Angie also discussed how she had the students answer questions about their families as part of her lesson.

We discussed their answers and realized just how culturally diverse our classroom was. I asked the students why these differences are important, and we discussed the importance of each and every person and that their unique background shapes our classroom community. Then, I asked the students to think about their neighborhoods, and how the culture of their own family or their neighbors has influenced their community.

Guiding students in conversations and activities, which mirror "real life" society situated in Picower's (2012) element one and two was also an attractive lesson for the preservice teachers. As Hayli watched her practicum lesson unfold, she became emotional watching students take on societal roles.

Each student was assigned a role mirrored from society at large. As the students began building their community, they began to assign themselves roles; I cried a little as I observed them doing this. One volunteered to be the mayor, another to build the post office, then someone else offered to make a fire station. They then

decided they needed a lake for food and to get water for their gardens. It was amazing to see the teamwork and critical thinking that took place with the students. They were building their neighborhood! (CA1)

Hayli (I) observed, “a friendship developed in this lesson which was a bridge built between two very different boys from different cultures.” Not only was the concept of communal support explored by her practicum students, but also Hayli’s lesson helped bring students together from different backgrounds, which in turn could have a positive effect on future relationships.

Nicole’s practicum assignment was distinctive from the other preservice teachers, because she was placed at an urban-based school and was provided an opportunity to explore social justice issues due to the level of diversity present within the school (I).

There were a high percentage of Hispanic kids, so that created a sense of diversity. Not just in race though, but with religion in Utah as well. You know there are a lot of Mormons and this school had Catholics, Protestants and a couple of kids who were Chinese, so they were Buddhist. (I)

Nicole’s ability to articulate social justice ideals and conversations was predicated on her comfort and lens she brought to the classroom from her travels outside of the U.S.

However, descriptors such as “high percentage of Hispanic kids, so that created a sense of diversity” or “kids who were Chinese—so they were Buddhist” does not exemplify a social justice mindset. Later in the practicum, leading a fourth-grade lesson on archaeology of ancient Utah Native American sites, Nicole felt excited to help students make connections to artifacts and dismantle cultural misconceptions.

We had actually had a few kids in our class that had some Native American ancestors, so that was really cool to see them make the connections and for the other students to say, oh my gosh, do you have any cool things like that at your house that you can show us? It was neat to watch the kids interact like that. (I)

Her excitement for this lesson was palpable during the interview, but I found myself wondering if the Native American students in the class felt the same level of excitement to share part of their ancestry or did they feel like a token item among the other students.

One of the preservice teachers utilized technology to learn about others' differences and prompt the students to latch on to social justice or communal concepts. Adrienne's 4<sup>th</sup>-grade practicum lesson began with the students in the computer lab researching different countries that affected Utah, followed up with a class reading of the book *Wish*, which highlights wishes from children all over the world. Adrienne believed her lesson embodied a social justice mindset, but subversively pinpointed two students, "I only had a half an hour, and so it was really sad, because I wanted to get to the immigration topic, because I have two students who are immigrants." This comment alludes to Adrienne would not have discussed immigration if those "two students" were not in the classroom.

The objective of Casey's social justice experiential lesson was to have students actively explore the three branches of government to build an understanding of equality under the law (CA1). She quickly had to reassess the lesson due to "students getting out of hand" and their inability to "handle it" (I). She felt an overall sense of disrespect in the class and this made teaching challenging content experientially difficult. "There was a general lack of communal awareness in this setting" (CA1). The students did not have practice engaging in experiential lessons and so the classroom management strategies were not in place to help support Casey in executing her lessons in her practicum assignment. Angie's lesson confirmed Casey's observations.

The students have to have a certain level of maturity in order to engage in social justice topics, without it students will be disrespectful. Without trust or openness,

it would be very difficult to discuss these topics. It is critical to set up the classroom, so it is open to all ways of thinking...it helps the students feel valued. I know this helped me in our methods class, I participated, because we had created an environment where we all work together. (I)

Each preservice teacher embraced and executed communal social justice lessons in their own way based on their individual background, experience and competence.

### **Supplemental Practicum Experiences**

Mellaina appreciated the impromptu discussions that would arise in the practicum classroom regarding social justice issues, because of the methodology course, she was more aware of those “teachable moments” and found herself seeking those instances out. “I can see how some teachers would brush over difficult conversations because it is uncomfortable or not wanting to take the time, but I feel the more I embrace these opportunities, the more I will become comfortable with social justice conversations” (I). Mellaina observed her cooperating teacher model a Civil War lesson on reconstruction, which embodied a challenging conversation. “The kids were shocked by the reconstruction laws; they thought the slaves were just free after the war. When the teacher was reviewing all the laws the south put into place to prohibit blacks from being free, they were appalled!” She valued seeing what Mellaina calls, “the goodness in children” (I) at that moment—they were truly horrified. She fully appreciated her cooperating teacher taking the time to answer the student’s questions and not shy away from challenging content.

Taking the time to get to know the students as people, as human beings, was instrumental to the success of Megan’s practicum experience. She was provided the time

at the beginning of her practicum to lead and participate in teambuilding activities she learned in the methodology class. She felt this expedited her ability to get to know the students, as she said, “Getting to know each other as people, not just peers.”

### **Importance of Trust**

Through the preservice teacher’s methodology and practicum experiences, they connected with the importance of building communities to teach for social justice. However, one core concept emerged that was central to building classroom community - trust was critical and referred to as a central building block to effectively teach for social justice, which was echoed in the success of the experiential activities as well.

To be able to teach for social justice, I feel like you have to build classroom community and for everyone to feel safe, for everyone to feel like they trust each other, for everyone to support each other without tearing anyone down. (Nicole, I)

Angie, too, felt trust is essential among students. Trust is elevated within a supportive community; individuals are more willing to ask for help in academic and social contexts (Angie, I). Many of the preservice teachers shared how teaching for social justice (beyond holidays and celebrations) would be extremely difficult without a sense of community and trust in the classroom (AR). If the classroom is a safe, trusting environment, the students are more likely to show their sensitive side (Angie, AR).

When there is a lack of trust, it is extremely difficult to teach experientially or bring up social justice issues. For example, Casey was extremely frustrated in her practicum assignment due to the lack of standing classroom management processes missing from the practicum classroom, which made it difficult for students to trust each

other in challenging activities or class discussions. When Casey attempted to teach her experiential lesson, she reflected;

It was too hard for that class, because they hadn't been welcomed or taught how to be in a safe classroom to want to work together—this classroom has lots of teasing and bullying and those kinds of things going on. So, you really can't do experiential education or activities until social justice issues in the classroom are taken care of and the management is being taken care of; it was discouraging. (I)

Mellaina really valued learning new perspectives from the methodology class and she took this learning with her to the practicum environment, commenting, “everyone’s opinion is valid” (I). When students would make comments she internally questioned the validity of what they were asking or commenting upon, she worked hard to model the environment where students felt they could say whatever was on their mind and they would not be harshly criticized. She ultimately wanted every student to trust her, their classmates and feel their perspective is valued (CA1).

### **Summary**

Six of the seven preservice teachers during their interviews shared altruistic stories of building communities to teach for social justice in their practicum experiences. Many of these stories were situated on the premise of creating classroom environments to foster a sense of belonging where all children felt loved and appreciated, which are entry elements to teaching for social justice. While, the preservice teachers in this study were able to harness their agency to create a powerful learning community together in the methodology course, they experienced substantial difficulties operationalizing lessons to cultivate learning communities to teach for social justice in the practicum setting.



Primarily, their difficulties were due to a lack of professional competency. The preservice teachers were not able to develop the necessary professional competency because they did not have the time within the practicum class to fully develop their skills to create communities to teach for social justice.

## CHAPTER VI

### MODELS AND SUPPORT

*Learning to teach—like teaching itself—is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become.*

(Britzman, 2003, p. 31)

The methodology course was structured on a model in which students would gain tactical examples, practice, and theoretical background to apply experiential education activities to build communities to enhance knowledge to teach for social justice. Because I used Morine-Dersheimer and Corrigan's (1997) four conditions to facilitate change in an individual as a guide to developing course content and lessons, these four conditions were also used to analyze the preservice teachers' operationalizing actions in the practicum environment to teach for social justice.

The analysis brought to light a difficulty among the preservice teachers to implement experiential methods or engage in social justice lessons due to minimal agency and professional competency, which was heavily influenced by their need to belong to a practicum community. After nine weeks of participation in experiential and social justice methodology and involvement in a cohesive classroom community built on trust, the preservice teachers demonstrated a lack of agency and competence to operationalize experiential learning to teach for social justice in the practicum setting. The desire to belong to the practicum professional community proved to be a paramount variable for the seven participants. Challenging the status quo coupled with their desire for professional acceptance from colleagues made it difficult for the preservice teachers

to fully implement experiential lessons, build their professional agency or competently teach for social justice.

The challenges of teaching for social justice within their practicum classrooms was due to several key factors—adequate time to teaching for social justice (for lesson execution and time committed to teaching social studies in general), need for professional acceptance, and lack of teaching competence, such as meager classroom management.

### **Condition One: Time**

To educate from an experiential mindset combined with the desire to create a classroom open to explore social justice issues takes time—time for lesson execution, but also for creating the time within the day to address social justice issues grounded in social studies content. Including teaching for social justice in a mandated social studies curriculum provides an avenue for infusion of diverse ideas in a historical framework. Unfortunately, social studies content is not a mandated or tested subject in numerous states and with this being the case many teachers overlook social studies standards in order to make space for math, language arts, and science content standards (RJ, TO). The removal of social studies from the classroom can be problematic because the potential opportunity to teach for social justice diminishes.

Several of the preservice teachers noted an absence of the use of experiential methods, social studies or the desire to teach for social justice within their practicum classrooms, which the preservice teachers were not aware of at the start of the semester. Adrienne specifically had a perspective shift about social studies education.

The methods class opened my eyes to social studies. It is the study of society, the study of human beings, and this can be and should be done every day. My cooperating tried to incorporate social studies twice a week, but often it was the first content cut if there were other pressures. I experienced a perspective shift; social studies is an umbrella for all other content areas. (Adrienne, CA2)

Nicole's passion and optimism for the social studies was evident throughout the semester and in the final interview. Her real excitement came from the realization that social studies content could be infused into many subjects throughout the day. "Social studies is such a hard content area to teach, because of the amount of time to do it well" (I).

As teachers, we only have so many hours in a week to help students become better people. It is so important to teach social justice topics and emphasize how important they are because it is too often ignored. As an educator, it is my responsibility to help my students become understanding, kind, tolerant people who can be open-minded. (CA1)

Combined with this noted absence of the methods and content studied in the course, three of the preservice teachers observed a distinct deficiency of time dedicated to social studies content and lesson delivery from the cooperating teachers in the practicum classroom. Casey's experience was not unique in that she "never saw her cooperating teacher teach social studies, let alone anything experiential" (CA, 2).

A few of the preservice teachers had the support of their cooperating teachers to teach social studies content but did not adequately provide time within the school day to engage in meaningful social studies lessons. Mellaina was frustrated by the lack of time she had allotted for to discuss Utah immigration with her fourth-grade practicum students. This lack of time was attributed to the time allotted to teach social studies. "I only had that half-an-hour, so it was kind of sad, because I wanted to get to the

immigration topic and it was kind of a quick discussion” (Mellaina, CA1). Adrienne felt prepared to teach but was also concerned with having time- enough time to “fit in all in a day” (I). She mentioned within her practicum “the cooperating teacher doesn’t even teach social studies, she said she doesn’t have time. By the teacher making a choice not to deliver social studies content, it sends a message to the students about valuing that kind of information” (I). Every time I hear comments like this, I think to myself, when will we as a society find the time, find the time to listen, to problem solve, to critically think or to break down human actions (RJ).

Learning how to structure lessons and provide adequate time to teach social studies offered a challenge for Angie too. She was unsure how much time to spend teaching specific issues or concepts—she was unsure of how to embed larger overarching social justice ideas into traditional social studies content (I). Unfortunately, she did not receive the support or modeling from her cooperating teacher on how to structure the time for social studies lessons. I, too, made a note of this feedback, because I am the teacher educator preparing students to teach social studies and I could have scaffolded the class to provide more opportunities to learn timing skills (RJ).

### **Condition Two: Dialogue**

The dialogue, which occurs between the cooperating teacher and the practicum student, is core to their development as a teacher, because of the constant, direct learning opportunities happening at a rapid pace. The ability for the preservice teachers to discuss and reflect on their lessons, assessments and student interactions with the cooperating

teacher was a factor in the success of each practicum experience. The preservice teachers in this study illuminated two areas in which dialogue with the cooperating teacher could have impacted the success of their experiential, social justice lesson. Specifically, the preservice teachers commented on seeking dialogue and clarification on differentiation and interdisciplinary connections.

Even though the preservice teachers were excited about using experiential methods, they were unsure about how to differentiate lessons or activities for the lower grades. In concert with the uncertainty of infusing experiential methods with lower grades in the elementary, the preservice teachers also were uncertain how to progress beyond Picower's (2012) elements one and two with younger students. Several questioned the cognitive ability of younger students to move beyond demonstrating respect for others and exploring issues of social injustice. "How do I differentiate hard or difficult conversations for younger students? I felt they wouldn't understand slavery, poverty or challenging social justice issues (Angie, I). Nicole tried to implement the *Web of Connections* with a second-grade class, but she found many of the students were "just passing the rope around" (I), not fully engaged in the activity itself. It is plausible to assume if the preservice teachers had conversed with their cooperating teachers before implementing their experiential, social justice lessons about their concerns, the cooperating teacher could have provided feedback and guidance on differential strategies.

Teaching from an interdisciplinary mindset is an advanced skill and requires reflective practice with knowledgeable teachers to gain mastery. Within the practicum environment, one preservice teacher benefited from a cooperating teacher who discussed

the interdisciplinary lesson planning process. From this conversation, Mellaina seemed to grasp the idea of teaching for social justice across disciplines and used an experience in her practicum class to showcase her learning. “My cooperating teacher and I sat down and reviewed the book *Esperanza Rising*, which she was using with the class. She wanted to create opportunities for the students to explore the main characters feelings” (I). She recalled how this blend of social studies, social justice, and language arts played out in the practicum classroom.

So, like the students mentioned today that you couldn’t have a life in Mexico, because they were women. And so we had that discussion, I can see how those conversations might just get brushed over or not taking the time to have the conversation even though it might be kind of uncomfortable, but we had a great discussion. (I)

Mellaina continued to pursue this discussion with her students with the tools she had learned from her coursework.

So, the students wanted to discuss how women could have been treated in such a derogatory way. I reminded the students it was the thoughts and feelings of people at that time...the students couldn’t believe it, and it was 100 years before those rules were taken away. (I)

Mellaina seemed to experience an intrinsic response to the questions the students were asking, “It was just good to see the like the goodness of children at that moment, because they were really like just horrified that had happened for 100 years. So, they really did guide that discussion” (I)! Taking the time to discuss and reflect on the interdisciplinary applications of social studies across content areas to enhance the ability to teach for social justice was a critical link in the effective operationalization of skills learned in the methodology course.

### **Condition Three: Practice**

Several of the preservice teachers felt invigorated conceptualizing the use of experiential methods to teach for social justice. There was also great trepidation to try innovative methodologies or discuss complicated social issues in the practicum classroom. Feelings of wanting to fit in and not rock the boat were evident in the reflections from the preservice teachers. Teacher education programs create practicum experiences for preservice teachers, so they can ideally have a safe harbor to practice their learning. Although, many preservice teachers enter the practicum feeling the pressure to perform as a master teacher or follow suit as to how the other teachers are executing lessons (TO).

The ability for the preservice teachers to see the infusion of experiential learning, community building or teaching for social justice into their daily practice was problematic and limited due to the lack of exposure, experience with these concepts, and ability to plan accordingly. “I like the idea of teaching experientially, but it will take a lot of work, major planning” (Megan, I). Adrienne felt “starting small and simple” (CA1) would be best practice in her practicum classroom. She was hesitant to “take big risks with experiential education, but attempted discovery activities; I tried to follow my cooperating teacher’s protocols” (I). Even after spending weeks within the methodology course discussing and practicing techniques to make learning experiential, operationalizing their learning was still challenging.

Finding a school culture that was open to staff practicing, discussing and reflecting on innovative teaching methods was important to several of the participants.



Currently, in Utah, a climate exists where charter schools are gaining a reputation as an alternative to traditional methods and teaching, three of the preservice teachers held a belief that working within a charter school would provide teachers “more freedom and more say in lessons and curriculum and practice unique methods” (Mellaina, I) where teachers could practice new and innovative teaching skills.

Three preservice teachers in this study had a practicum assignment in a charter school setting. Two of the three participants felt the charter school environment provided a haven to try out experiential methods without professional ramifications. Megan felt like she “lucked out getting placed at the University lab school” (I) where experiential methods were part of the norm within the teaching body. “I wasn’t asking to teach funky lessons they weren’t used to or that I didn’t see other teachers trying out” (I). Conversely, Casey’s placement in a direct instruction charter school was a detriment to her ability to teach experiential lessons. Based on the data collected in this study, I cannot conclude a charter school environment would provide a greater ability to practice the skills preservice teachers gained in their university coursework.

### **Confidence**

The preservice teacher’s success in operationalizing teaching skills in the practicum setting was inherently linked to their confidence in creating and delivering engaging lessons paired with the support of the cooperating teacher. When interviewing the participants, I specifically asked if heading into the practicum they felt encouraged to write and deliver experiential lessons in a social studies context. Hayli felt excitingly anxious about heading into the practicum.

I was excited to try everything I had learned, but I needed to feel out my cooperating teacher first—how did she run her classroom that was my biggest holdback. What if she hadn't taught lessons like that before or wasn't in favor, I didn't want to push the issue as a Level III Practicum student (I).

The data revealed many of the preservice teachers shared Hayli's enthusiasm for trying experiential lessons and wanted to build communal relationships with the students, but they were wary about gaining the approval from their cooperating teacher.

Casey was filled with confidence at the beginning of her practicum, but after spending several days in her practicum, she realized, "there was no community in the class, so when I tried to teach experientially it failed" (CA, 1). She remained optimistic though and felt with more practice her skills and confidence would improve.

It was really hard and stressful to fail, but it didn't turn me away from teaching experientially. I just need to have my classroom management down. When I do my student teaching next semester I plan on implementing experiential activities, just because it didn't work in my practicum classroom doesn't mean I wouldn't try it again. (I)

The preservice teachers in this study even amongst setbacks such as a poorly managed practicum classroom remained optimistic about their professional growth and desire to take risks in future teaching environments.

### **Level of Preparation**

The majority of the preservice teachers expressed a high level of preparedness in delivering elementary social studies lessons at the conclusion of the semester based on the practice received between the methodology course and practicum. Mellaina mentioned there was only "so much you can learn from the university classroom" (I) and

she was ready to give teaching experientially a try. Mellaina's heightened level of preparedness kept any fears at bay. Conversely, Megan commented, "As a special education major, I want to continue to learn how to break up social studies into manageable chunks." Megan was still seeking this knowledge at the completion of the semester and felt she could benefit from more general education preparation versus the intense special education courses, which filled her schedule. Reflecting on her preparation, Angie felt like she could approach teaching for social justice after the course.

Before the methodology class, I had no idea how to teach social studies let alone be able to lead a social justice discussion; I wouldn't have known how to handle it. Now, I can say I feel comfortable bringing up social justice issues, leading a discussion and providing a place for students to share their thoughts. (Angie, CA2)

Casey's practicum experience was not as she had hoped, but she learned "preparation is key to my success in the classroom" (I). "If you don't know something, you need to take the time to learn about it or ready for it, whatever you are doing—know what you are talking about or else the class could go down in flames!" (Casey, I). She witnessed first-hand how a lack of preparation from her cooperating teacher directly impacted the level of student engagement and conceptual understanding.

Megan's nervousness stemmed from not being prepared to teach the intricacies of social studies content and in turn, would communicate misinformation.

I know that as much information as I have learned about other cultures and ways of life, I will still be missing key factors and need to be careful to not assume right off the bat that a student is from a particular culture—that could be damaging to the relationship between teacher and student. I feel my role as an educator is teach social justice issues correctly and help get students not see issues through stereotypical eyes. I want to be an example AND learn from the students. (Megan, I)

To adequately prepare preservice teachers to effectively teach social studies from an experiential mindset takes time, dialogue, practice and ultimately support from a collegial community. Participants in this study clearly articulated a desire to engage students in experiential lessons, but need continual practice to enhance their confidence and level of preparedness.

#### **Condition Four: Support**

Support and modeling from the cooperating teacher in the practicum placement are critical factors to aid the successful implementation of concepts the preservice teachers had learned in their university coursework. The support the preservice teachers received in these initial practicum assignments was vital in feeling accepted among the faculty. Mellaina illuminated this point.

I think for me to use experiential methods I will need support from my colleagues and if it fits into what they are teaching. I don't want to stick out like a sore thumb and teach experientially and all of the other teachers have a hard time with it or if the class the year before didn't learn in an experiential way, it will be hard for them to transition to an experiential classroom. (I)

The preservice teachers viewed teaching experientially or addressing social justice issues as risky, particularly because they yearned for collegial acceptance and support. The risk was also associated with fear among the participants. Several of the preservice teachers described a fear of loneliness in the workplace due to the potential of teaching “out of the box” or “against the grain,” which could be contradictory to other methods taught in the school (TO). The cooperating teacher can be a vital link and role model in navigating the school climate when taking innovative risks.

Cooperating teachers in the practicum classroom played an instrumental role in the ability of the preservice teachers to try out experiential methods to teach for social justice and observe what current practices were implemented in the practicum classroom. Hayli was thrilled she was placed in a classroom where the teacher embraced the concept of community and wanted the students to learn how their decisions affected each other.

It is important, as teachers, we help students build their social knowledge, how to treat people with respect and how to act in certain situations. It is important to take the time to do this in the classroom. My cooperating teacher accomplished this with daily class meetings to start the day. (Hayli, I)

Angie's cooperating teacher was supportive and fundamentally believed in taking innovative risks such as creating a communal atmosphere. "My teacher talked about creating classroom rules and how the students help by being involved with classroom management" (Angie, I).

Casey's confidence in her teaching ability was adversely affected by the negative relationship and support gained from her cooperating teacher. Not only was her relationship strained as a practicum student, but also Casey strongly felt the cooperating teacher had fostered an unhealthy classroom environment, which Casey termed the "social justice tone" (I).

You can't even branch into experiential activities until you have set the social justice tone in the classroom. My practicum lesson was so hard for the class, because they hadn't been welcomed or taught how to work in a safe classroom and to WANT to work together. In my practicum classroom, there was substantial bullying and teasing taking place. (Casey, I)

This unhealthy environment affected the support the cooperating teacher could provide Casey as well as impacted her success with innovative instructional methods. This did not dampen their spirits to try implementing experiential lessons though. Casey's practicum

experience was negative on numerous levels, but it only inspired her more to be the change she wishes to see in elementary classrooms.

I definitely want to use experiential methods in the future. I will never forget the beginning of the semester, when you told us we were going to ‘experience social studies’...the class provided so many opportunities to learn and create a positive environment...we discovered it for ourselves. (I)

Combined with the support from cooperating teachers and colleagues, the preservice teachers mentioned administrative support would contribute to their ability to teach experientially and address social justice issues with students. It was difficult for the majority of preservice teachers to envision an administrator who would be instantly on board with experiential methods to teach for social justice. The infusion of experiential activities into the classroom would be highly dependent on the support and acceptance from the administrative team in the building, which could take time.

I don’t know if I will have a chance to teach experientially, maybe if the school supported it, maybe not my first year, but after a couple of years I could convince my administration to let me teach that way. (Adrienne, I)

Adrienne continued to comment on the need for time to gain support.

The support of the administration means a lot, if they are willing to listen to new ideas and take action necessary to help with implementation of the ideas, then I think it could work. I bet administrators have a lot on their plate and there is red tape too, so I would want to give them time to get to know me before I ask to take kids outside. (Mellaina, I)

Nicole affirmed buy-in needed on the administrative level is essential to dismay skepticism from other teachers. She felt she could do this by willingly discussing innovative methods with colleagues or inviting administrators into the classroom to observe her teaching experientially (Nicole, I). By taking a proactive stance, the benefits are openly shared among all stakeholders.

I think you have to have some kind of buy-in from your principal, because teaching experientially is a different way of teaching content, so I think some administrators might be skeptical and I think just being prepared to show the benefits of it and allowing your teaching cohorts or your principal to come and experience it with you would be really a valuable tool to get that support from your principal. Invite your teaching cohort and administration into the classroom to experience it together. (Nicole, I)

Hayli shared Nicole's optimism regarding administrative buy-in. She could not understand why a principal would not want a teacher to instruct in a new or creative way; she has also had positive experiences with teachers modeling collaborative actions in Professional Learning Communities, like sharing ideas and receiving positive feedback (I).

Collegial and administrative acceptance were key to the ability for preservice teachers to feel confident in teaching experientially or about social justice issues, but the preservice teachers were also resolute the support from parents would be the deciding factor in a successful, innovative and communal classroom (Nicole, Adrienne, and Casey, I). Adrienne worried about parent buy-in for doing "different activities than what they did when they were in school" (I) and would have to defend her choices. To combat this potential roadblock, Angie planned to provide parents of students in her classroom a list of controversial topics to be discussed over the course of year (I). The combination of collegial and parental acceptance to teach experientially and tackle social justice issues in the classroom were critical variables to the depth of lesson execution for the preservice teachers.

## Summary

In this chapter, the preservice teachers expressed that their desire for professional acceptance was heavily influenced by collegial and administrative cooperation and support, which directly impacted their ability to build agency and professional competence in the use of experiential methods to teach for social justice. The specific challenges due to a lack of adequate instructional time and minimal coaching from the cooperating teacher to deliver effective lessons were hefty and eventually impacted the implementation of the preservice teacher's experiential lessons in the practicum. Moreover, and most likely the most difficult challenge for the preservice teachers to overcome was the desire to belong to a learning community in the practicum setting in order to gain professional acceptance among their practicum colleagues. This specific challenge was paramount in thwarting the preservice teachers' development of agency and competence with leading experiential activities to teach for social justice. Ultimately, the preservice teachers sacrificed their agency and reshaped their competence to gain professional acceptance in the practicum setting.

In the following chapter, the factors influencing the findings of the study are discussed further and connected to Carver's (1996) ABC's of Student Experience in the context of answering the research questions. Additionally, the implications for teacher education programs based on the findings of the study are provided.



## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this instrumental qualitative case study was to gauge how learning communities built from the use of experiential methods affect learning to teach for social justice with elementary preservice teachers in a social studies methodology course. The case study model enabled the opportunity to paint a vivid and holistic depiction of the preservice teacher's conceptualizations and possible operationalization of the use of experiential methods for the teaching of social justice and the ability to create learning communities. Additionally, the study documented the preservice teacher's ability to transfer their conceptualization and operationalization of experiential methodologies to teach for social justice from the university classroom to the practicum setting. Building a learning community primarily on experiential methods to teach for social justice as advocated by D. A. Kolb (1984), Carver (1996), and Dover (2013), provided the as the framework for the preservice teachers to accomplish this goal. The following research questions were examined in this research study.

1. How do preservice elementary teachers in a social studies methods course conceptualize teaching for social justice within an experiential framework?
  - a. How does developing community in an elementary social studies methods course develop/foster preservice teachers understanding of teaching for social justice?
2. In what ways did preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in the practicum classroom?

This chapter discusses the implications of the research findings and based on these findings, how to accomplish the goal of opening dialogue among teacher education

programs and schools of how experiential methodologies could create a climate that will help foster teaching for social justice with preservice teachers. Data, which was contained in the participants' reflective journals, end of term interviews, my researcher reflective logs and purposeful classroom assignments, revealed three main findings.

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

Structuring the methodology course to expose the preservice teachers to experiential methods was a deliberate and thoughtful process. Based on my subjective knowledge and what is stated in the literature, preservice teachers come to university programs as well as their practicum experiences with premolded conceptualizations of who they want to be as a classroom teacher based on their own lived experiences as a student (Grossman, 1985; Lortie, 1975; Pantić, 2015; Villegas, 2007). Preservice teachers file away and retrieve experiences that help them form what and how to teach (Britzman, 2003; Lortie, 1975; Villegas, 2007). The preservice teachers in this study also came to the methodology course with formidable experiences as students. For example, Megan's disdain for social studies and Adrienne's reliance on social media to access information

about diverse issues presented a challenge as the course instructor.

I was aware guiding the preservice teachers in creating professional mental images of themselves using experiential methods or teaching for social justice would be demanding, due to their limited exposure to these concepts and bias from previous social studies experience. For me to contribute to their current professional conceptualizations, the methods class had to provide purposeful learning experiences, which preservice teachers connected with and would want to replicate in a future classroom. Choosing to deliver the majority of the course content through experiential means was congruent with A. Kolb and Kolb (2005) and Carver (1996), who stress experiential activities have been proven to be effective in generating student involvement and participation in the learning process. Additionally, using D. A. Kolb (1984) and Carver's experiential learning frameworks in the course design, I was able to link the elements for teaching for social justice that Picower (2012) has outlined. The ability to link together these elements was due to the balance of reflection with action implemented in the course, which allowed me the availability to reach a variety of learning styles (McDonald, 2005) and generate a climate of inclusivity.

The pedagogy drawn from experiential learning theory (Carver, 1996; D. A. Kolb, 1984) can meet overarching goals of teaching for social justice, due to the incorporation of actions that are “collaborative, democratic, participatory and inclusive” (Storms, 2012, p. 550). A. Kolb and Kolb (2005) stress the importance of actively participating in contentious situations, such as the work in social justice. Often it is “conflict, differences, and disagreement” (p. 4) that drives the learning process. Over the course of the semester,

the preservice teachers actively participated in lessons that challenged their innate beliefs about experiential learning, community building, and social justice and slowly constructed new conceptualizations of their responsibility to teach for social justice.

Carver's (1996) explanation of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provided the foundation for the structure of the methods course with the intention that the experiential lessons would provide the mechanism and catalyst for connecting methodology knowledge to their upcoming practicum experiences (Carver, 1996; Morine-Dersheimer, 1989). Aligning social studies content with experiential learning theory was an exceptional match because ELT is an interdisciplinary framework (Carver, 1996) and often social studies is taught from an interdisciplinary mindset. Coupled with interdisciplinary connections, social studies content and the tenants of experiential learning are synonymous because of the shared values of "caring, compassion, communication, critical thinking, respect for self and others, individuality and responsibility" (Carver, 1996, p. 153).

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

However, 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. Carver (1996) recommends using her framework as a map for situating the confluence of development of agency, belonging and competence and how they work in concert to enhance learning.

The findings in this chapter are discussed with Carver's (1996) ABC's of Student Experience as its underpinning. The development of **A**gency, a sense of **B**elonging and the growth of **C**ompetency were tangible outcomes I had expected to observe the preservice teachers. Moreover, I expected the preservice teachers to develop further their understanding and operationalization of teaching for social justice. At the conclusion of the chapter, implications for teacher education programs based on the findings of this study are also discussed.

## **Agency**

### **Conceptual Agency Development**

One of the goals of social justice education is to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become competent agents of change (Storms, 2012). Carver (1996) theorizes the development of agency is vital to develop because it allows the individual to develop a locus of control that allows them to gain confidence in their

acquired skills and knowledge so that they can be agents of change. Teacher educators must strategically think how to open the gateway for development of agency in their students so that the skills and knowledge they attain can be confidently applied in their practicum setting. Additionally, teacher education programs must ensure preservice teachers are supported for their use of acquired skills and knowledge once in the practicum setting. Often it is difficult to develop social justice agency because preservice teachers are attempting to teach contemporary methods and practices while struggling to gain professional acceptance, and belong to a learning community, which showed to be paramount in this study. I. Ideally, by creating an environment in the methodology class where students could feel an intimate sense of belonging allowed them to explore social justice to learn how to be agentic actors in future contexts (Pantić, 2015).

Concrete experiences, such as the interactive lesson about September 11th provided the gateway for students to take part in thoughtful social justice discussions based on their observations and reflections. The reflections served as a guide for assimilating abstract concepts and setting the course to test the reflections in the future (Caver, 1996; A. Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This type of reflection and abstraction process is a central premise to Experiential Learning Theory (Carver, 1996) and critical to social justice work. Teacher educators should strive to create contextual experiences for students to promote dialogue so that they can evaluate social contexts to facilitate building their professional agency (Freire, 1970; A. Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Pantić, 2015).

The preservice teachers conceptualized their agency to implement experiential lessons to teach for social justice on a fundamental level, which was in line

developmentally for an individual with their level of experience. Collectively they felt teaching for social justice was a critical responsibility to take on as a teacher. Although even with high aims to teach for social justice, there was little evidence to suggest the teachers' utilized their acquired agency to engage students to examine structural inequalities or work toward societal change. Rather, their lessons focused on teaching students how to make better choices and to be respectful of each other; values perceived by the preservice teachers as easier to navigate because of the lack of conflict associated with these topics.

In support of the first research question of this study, students did develop their agency in the methods course through gaining confidence in using experiential methods to teach social justice, consciously anxiously acknowledging that they have the power to be a force of change in schools. Although once in their clinical placement, the preservice teachers were not able to sustain the momentum of their agency to deliver social justice lessons due to deficient mechanisms of support and a desire for professional acceptance or belonging, which Carver (2006) reports as a critical part of agency development. However, students often expressed they did not want to rock the boat or disturb the traditional teaching practices and norms with the use of experiential methods, therefore, their desire to belong to the practicum learning community was not a positive factor in reinforcing their agency. On the contrary, students were not able to continue the development of their agency due both to their strong desire to belong to the group, which did not utilize experiential teaching methodology for the teaching of social justice and due to the inability to apply their newfound skills regularly, or at all.

I realized utilizing Carver's (1996) ABC's of student experience as a framework for the development of the preservice teacher's agency, sense of belonging and competence to teach social justice lessons, they needed frequent and repetitive opportunities to develop their agency. By weaving components of Carver's model through weekly expectations in activities to teach for social justice, the students had repetitive exposure to experiential methodology with hopes to solidify their learning. Unfortunately, once the formal practicum began, the weekly cycle to practice experiential methods to teach for social justice ceased. The cessation of direct and reoccurring reflective learning opportunities significantly impacted the ability of the preservice teachers to build agency and competence to teach their newly acquired skills.

### **Operationalization of Agency in the Practicum**

Developing agency in relation to its contextual application through direct learning environments is paramount, rather than the acquisition of knowledge taking precedence without its application in a contextual environment (Pantić, 2015). Knowing this, I anticipated the structure of each specific practicum would either support or negate the preservice teacher's application of experiential methods to teach for social justice. What I did not anticipate was how strong the need to belong to a learning community within the practicum setting would be and how forcefully it would overtake the agency they had developed in their methodology class.

As the practicum approached for the preservice teachers, the students expressed reservations in operationalizing experiential lessons to teach for social justice within the



practicum assignment in our class meeting. These personal revelations from the students are congruent with preservice teachers in Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) who also deeply understood the importance of making a difference in their own classrooms, but were uncertain of their agency to influence structural change in the educational system. Students need time to build their repertoire of skills, tools, and methodologies to bring about desired student outcomes, especially with delicate social justice issues (Villegas, 2007). In designing the practicum component for the course, the intention was for the time to be allocated for the preservice teachers to practice new skills and methods in order to teach experientially, build learning communities and educate for social justice. However, this only occurred on a superficial level because of the lack of support provided to implement new methods within the practicum environment.

With proper support and instruction, preservice teachers are capable of incorporating innovative teaching methods into the practicum environment (Britzman, 2003; Dover, 2013). The incorporation of newly acquired experiential teaching methods in the practicum environment differed among the preservice teachers, which in part may be attributed to their varying levels of individual agency and competence teaching new and innovative methods in contrast to the realities of doing so in an actual classroom. Too often, preservice teachers enter the teaching profession and encounter praxis shock when they witness the realities of a classroom environment (Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004) Simply, the realities of the classroom environment and the demands on their teaching skills often do not align with their educational preparation. If not managed, praxis shock can lead to a lack of professional acceptance or isolation in the

workplace, which may lead to a decreased capacity to take innovative risks (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). How were the preservice teachers in this study able to navigate praxis shock? The support and guidance of the cooperating teacher was a critical link in dampening the insecurities for each of the preservice teachers in this study. For example, the support Mellaina received from her cooperating teacher fed her professional confidence to lead meaningful discussions with students, exploring complex issues of gender and cultural stereotypes in *Esperanza Rising*.

In concert with the critical support needed from the cooperating teacher to infuse innovative methodologies into the practicum classroom, taking time to set clear expectations between the cooperating teacher, the preservice teacher and the teacher education faculty has been shown to be imperative in order to develop and operationalize agency (Cummings, Harlow, & Maddux, 2007). Without a firm understanding of the expectations in the practicum environment, often preservice teachers will shrink away from taking innovative risks, because they do not want to upset the current status quo, which limits their opportunities for practice, directly stifling their agency development. Often, preservice teachers perceive professional competence as “not rocking the boat” (Bloomfield, 2010, p. 227) and this mentality was supported in the actions of the preservice teachers in this study. Specifically, the inability to take innovative risks in the practicum classroom impacted the ability of the preservice teachers to operationalize agency to implement their newly acquired experiential methods to teach for social justice.

### **Operationalization of Social Justice Agency**

Through utilization of Picower’s (2012) six-element framework, a formal

structure was embedded into teaching for social justice as well as the provision of tools to develop agency in the preservice teachers so they would be confident in their ability to open dialogue on challenging conversations or topics with elementary students. For example, the preservice teachers access to Picower's concrete tools bolstered their agency and were helpful in dismantling feelings of being overwhelmed by social justice questions and content. A deeper exploration of social justice content did not occur for the preservice teachers in this study. Instead, the preservice teachers' focused on the methodological tools utilized in elements one, and two in Picower's steps to teaching for social justice. Several of the preservice teachers found comfort in hovering in these entry level elements of the framework because they either did not feel they would be supported by their practicum colleagues to explore these subjects or the lack of development of classroom community was not able to support exploration into other elements. Therefore, they opted to reach for the entry elements on Picower's steps to teaching for social justice.

The first step on Picower's ladder is element one that emphasizes self-love, specifically and knowledge can provide students with the background to recognize the individual attributes of members in their communities. Element two emphasizes respecting others, and specifically students can gain respect for people who are different from themselves. Often elementary teachers frame these elements as creating "fairness" and to teach "students to listen with kindness and empathy to the experiences of their peers" (Picower, 2012, p. 2). For example, Nicole demonstrated her understanding of element one and two through her practicum lesson on Native American artifacts as she

guided students to inquire about unique objects from classmates. Nicole's lesson, however, did not move past element two, even though the possibility to continue a conversation about native peoples today could have been added to the lesson if modeled by the practicum teacher.

Nicole's practicum experience was not unique, as none of the preservice teachers in this study were able to move to element three based on their lesson plan reflections, which emphasizes the shift from celebrating diversity, to an exploration of how diverse features have been used to rationalize oppressive actions against various groups of people (Picower, 2012). Even though we experienced element three in the methodology class through explicit dialogue, the students were more comfortable teaching lessons within element one and two versus the other four elements. I attribute this stagnation to having the necessary time for the preservice teachers to develop adequate community in their classroom, but more importantly, from a lack of support from the cooperating teacher to branch into higher-level social justice conversations. There is the possibility the students could not develop the necessary competence to teach social justice lessons effectively, which provides perspective on research question two. While preservice teachers were able to operationalize their agency to teach for social justice on a more superficial level with low cognitive demand experiential methods, they were not able to move to higher level, even though they had expressed a desire to do so.

Ultimately, my aim was the preservice teachers would utilize their agency to create a community in the practicum environment through experiential methods where social justice issues could be addressed. Although their lessons promoted positive

feelings among students through use of element one and two, the preservice teacher's lessons did little to prepare students to work actively toward social structural equality (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Grant & Sleeter, 1997). Grant and Sleeter argue lessons focused on respecting others and identity development (elements one and two) often work to help students accept the status-quo because the framework, "stresses mainly the acceptance of differences without necessarily examining critically which differences are of most value and which are artifacts of historical or present injustices" (p. 105). Regrettably, the incapability for the preservice teachers to deeply and actively involve students in the examination of social justice issues through dialogue led to several missed teaching opportunities to experience higher elements to teach for social justice (Picower, 2012). The inability to teach experiential lessons to engage elementary students in social justice discussion could be related to the preservice teachers diminished agency and desire to belong to the practicum learning community, which did not support innovative teaching methods. Once they stepped into the practicum environment there was a perceived lack of collegial support, both affecting the preservice teacher's confidence to teach for social justice with experiential methods, even in moments when opportunities were presented.

Several of the preservice teachers had missed moments where their practicum students could have genuinely engaged with social justice content. For example, reflecting after the practicum, Megan realized she led her students in a lesson about the American Revolution, but did not provide the students the time to discuss the inequalities that thrust individuals to want to fight for independence. Likewise, although Adrienne's lesson focused on aspects of the Civil War, she shared she never led the students in a

discussion about the unjust treatment of individuals or underpinnings of slavery. In short, these two examples demonstrate the preservice teachers either did not place a strong priority on helping their students recognize unjust situations in history or felt more comfortable addressing social justice issues on a superficial, individual or classroom level, rather than in a larger political sphere (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009).

### **Acceptance Over Agency**

Even though all preservice teachers in this study were provided the tools to build community to teach for social justice through the development of their experiential teaching repertoire, their agency to guide students to probe deeply into social justice content was limited. The preservice teachers experienced difficulty in leading their students through Picower's (2012) elements three through six, which required deeper conversations with colleagues related to social justice. Additionally, the preservice teachers had difficulty implementing experiential activities with fidelity due to a lack of collegial support, a strong desire to belong to a practicum learning community and comfort with new methodologies, so in turn they were not able to create effective learning communities. Specifically, the preservice teachers noted a cooperating teacher who embraced innovative experiential methods or a desire to teach for social justice would have been beneficial to their agency development.

Unfortunately, the majority of the preservice teachers in this study did not have a cooperating teacher who embraced innovative experiential methods or a desire to teach for social justice. Teachers who embrace innovative methodologies, "often confront institutional demands, disciplinary constraints, and social pressures that significantly

hinder their ability to truly bring about a change of practices” (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 112). Grant and Sleeter (2006) argues teachers diversion from the traditional canon is not merely “an act of intellectual defiance but rather an understanding of how to think critically’ about and challenge the universality of that knowledge” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 635). I worked tirelessly over the course of the semester to model and lead the students through several experiential lessons where they had a chance to build their agency and competence to teach innovative methods effectively. But, in practicality, I fell short in preparing the preservice teachers to effectively navigate the real-life constraints placed on preservice teachers in a real-world setting and balance their desire to belong to a learning community within the practicum environment.

I found myself questioning why after weeks of coursework based on utilizing experiential methods to form the platform to teach for social justice, the preservice teachers were challenged to deliver high quality and interactive lessons. Through my reflections, I realized all but one of the preservice teachers in this study had relatively few intercultural experiences during their lives, and their lack of experience with diversity may have limited their commitment to teaching social justice, even after spending the semester studying social justice issues and experiential methodology. The teaching practices exemplified in the practicum environment corresponded to the findings in the literature that show developing a commitment to social justice is difficult for preservice teachers who have had few intercultural experiences (Aaronsohn, Carter, & Howard, 1995; Artiles et al., 2005) Villegas, 2007; Winfield, 1986). Due to the limited personal exposure to diverse experiences, the time must be created to allow new teachers to grow

and build their experiential skills so that they can use and apply innovative methods to teach for social justice. As teacher educators, we must remember it may be unrealistic to expect preservice teachers to develop a social justice mindset during their initial years in the profession, as it takes time to build the skills to teach for social justice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Villegas, 2007).

Largely the preservice teachers increased their agency to deliver experiential lessons to teach for social justice, which proved to be instrumental in their professional growth. However, they were not able to sustain their agency to deliver experiential lessons within their practicum classroom. Ultimately, their desire to belong and gain professional acceptance within the practicum environment overshadowed their agency and in turn eroded the preservice teacher's competence with experiential methodology.

### **Belonging**

The development of learning communities and social justice education are two relatively new fields, both emerging in the past twenty years within the realm of teacher education (Adams, 2016). Each field provides enormous benefits not only to students and teachers but also for educational institutions. The community approach to teaching for social justice, which espouses teachers to collaborate with students to challenge societal inequities (Grant & Astogo, 2008) is slowly replacing the image of teachers working alone, spouting off social justice must-dos'. Instead the focus on creating an atmosphere of belonging where controversial social justice issues can be addressed is advocated (Carver, 1996, 1997; Dover, 2013). Even though the drive to belong or to gain



professional acceptance from practicum colleagues thwarted the preservice teacher's agency to teach for social justice at a higher level once in their practicum setting, students did express that through the development of their methods class community they were able to attain a sense of belonging from members of the class, which enabled them to explore difficult and sensitive social justice issues without fear of reprisal. In regards to the research questions posed in this study, students were able to develop a learning community within their methods course to foster an understanding and commitment for teaching social justice, but lacked the ability to both develop their own learning community in their practicum classroom and to move their students to a deeper exploration of social justice topics due to possibly the strong desire to belong and conform to the norms in their practicum environment.

### **A Sense of Belonging Created**

Based on the central premise that learning results from social participation, Wenger (1998) argues through the active involvement in the routines and practices of social communities, identities are constructed through shared meaning making. The teachers in this study participated in a learning community that shaped their ability and confidence to teach for social justice (Pantić, 2015). By creating learning communities and engaging in shared experiential activities, the dynamic in the classroom shifted from a hierarchal perspective to a cooperative one (Kelly & Brandes, 2010). The impact of creating a sense of belonging in the methodology class was evidenced by Nicole's profound communal connection she experienced in *Walking in Their Shoes* when reflecting during her interview. I believe it was the collective mindset of the group that

prompted insightful conversation about religious toleration rather than myself as the instructor espousing my opinion or others on the subject.

My goal in utilizing experiential methods to build learning communities to teach for social justice was initially built upon A. Kolb and Kolb (2005) adamant belief that experiential learning is the key to group development and that communities must be developed to create a conversational space where students can reflect and talk about their lived experiences together. Deliberately structured experiential learning activities can provide equal opportunity to all students and an equal opportunity to be valued (A. Kolb & Kolb, 2005), which is congruent with the ideals in teaching for social justice to create a sense of belonging (Carver, 1997; Dover, 2009).

Conceptualizing teaching for social justice in a social studies context through experiential means was challenging for several of the preservice teachers. However, over the course of the semester, Picower's (2012) central themes of teaching for social justice—power, freedom, identity, equity and community served as the building blocks for the experiential activities taught. Distinctly, the participants were more easily able to identify with the overarching theme of theme of belonging to create a learning community over Picower's other themes. The strong identification with community could be linked to the abstract nature of what power, identity, freedom and equity truly mean to each preservice teacher. As Casey (I) reflected on the *Web of Connections*, “the web solidified our community...we built trust so that we could discuss social justice issues.” The Web of Connections activity also had overarching themes of equity and power, which was discussed at the conclusion of the activity, but those themes did not resonate

with the preservice teachers. Primarily, based on their journal reflections, the preservice teachers could conceptualize teaching for social justice with experiential methods as a tool to build trust within a learning community.

Developing a community of learners was a deliberate course of action for this study because teaching preservice educators how to collaborate to solve problems taught them how to act as critical colleagues, who challenge each other to go past their current ideas and practices (Nieto, 2000). Acting as critical colleagues served as a segue to teaching for social justice, because building a social justice learning community is based on action and cooperative activities, collective stories, and discourse acting for social justice (Grant & Agosto, 2008).

### **Development of Belonging**

Creating a sense of belonging and building a learning community was instrumental to several of the preservice teachers' over the course of the semester. During the interview at the completion of the course, Nicole and Hayli both noted how a sense of belonging, which developed in the methods class, created a learning community because of the direct activities that opened the door to share personal stories in relation to social justice. Learning in this way is not easy Nicole shared, "Learning how to talk and teach difficult subjects will be challenging as a teacher, but I am eager for it" (I). Stoll (2009) substantiates Nicole's feelings, "new ways of learning don't come easily" (p. 475). In fact, the benefit of peer support from a learning community is what will help support new teachers in examining novel methods, questioning practices, and supporting each other's growth (Little, 2003). By asking challenging questions in a supportive, communal

atmosphere aids in a teacher's ability to reflect on their agency and approach to social justice. Specifically, the preservice teachers developed a greater understanding of teaching for social justice because of the explicit participation in a learning community. However, the preservice teachers may not have been able to develop their own learning community within their practicum class because they may not have felt a sense of belonging or felt insecure in challenging the status quo within their practicum environment, possibly weakening their foundation upon which to teach for social justice.

My focus during the methods class was to build the student's foundation of experiential methodology for teaching social justice by engaging them in deliberate and recursive lessons that moved them to bond into a learning community who felt comfortable exploring the meaning of teaching from a social justice perspective. Wenger's (1998) belief is that it is the "doing of a task in a historical and social context that provides that student to bring meaning to an activity" (Harlow & Cobb, 2014, p. 81). Wegner continues to argue that meaning is created through engagement in activities and is negotiated through participation. The class became a learning community, which constructive interpersonal relationships created the foundation to teach for social justice. Numerous studies highlight the need for deliberate engagement in purposeful experiential pedagogy to effectively teach for social justice (McDonald, 2005; Storms, 2012). Storms (2012) also supports the use of experiential methodology with preservice teachers, because it can help students develop empathy towards oppressed groups and the actions placed upon them. A. Kolb and Kolb (2005) also advocate the use of experiential methodology to develop deeper interpretive learning, which can be strengthened by using

experiential activities to stimulate reflection through communal conversations.

Instrumental to learning to teach for social justice was building a climate of trust with preservice teachers, without trust individuals will not feel safe to collaborate or participate in open dialogue that could be scrutinized by others (Stoll, 2009). On several occasions, the preservice teachers discussed feeling vulnerable with specific methodology activities, but it was their shared vulnerability, which provided opportunities for growth and reflection. In these shared moments of vulnerability, an environment of openness and trust was created that fueled their compassion, deep learning and relationship building to discuss social justice issues. Congruent to Pantić (2015), trust was significant in influencing preservice teacher's willingness to take risks in intense experiential activities, such *Walking in Their Shoes*, *Web of Connections* or the Wind Caves hike helped propel the preservice teachers into vulnerable situations where trust was a necessity.

As we passed around the yarn, creating our web, a powerful visual of our community was formed. And then to lift Hayli up to demonstrate our strength, Wow! This is how you can teach for social justice, I feel like you have to build that community and for everyone to feel safe, for everyone to feel like they trust each other, for everyone to support each other without tearing anyone down.  
(Casey, I)

Sharing deep personal experiences or narratives in classroom settings helps establish a “communal commitment to learning” (hooks, 1994, p. 67). Pantić (2015) further substantiates this claim through her model for teacher agency for social justice. Trust and respect are cited as core to collaboration, agency development and transfer of knowledge (Pantić, 2015). These moments create the space to break down assumptions students might hold regarding class, race, gender, religion, or disability. As evidenced in the *Walking in Their Shoes* activity, in order to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance

effectively, a level of trust among participants must be acknowledged. As teacher educators, it is inherently our responsibility to create these moments, these spaces for reflective, purposeful discourse where students can experience comfort and support while telling their stories (Conle et al., 2000). Therefore, it may be possible the preservice teachers sense of belonging or ability to create learning communities in their practicum classes was too weak to engender their success in teaching deeper social justice issues. Trust and respect were not able to be fully developed under the contextual challenges of their practicum experience, thereby, creating a difficulty to explore deeper social justice topics.

Often, when hearing another student share a personal story, other students tend to want to respond with critical stories of his or her own (Conle, 1996). This storytelling is what unfolded during *Walking in Their Shoes* and prompted a connection with a difficult topic, one that many preservice teachers are apprehensive to talk about because of the associated emotions of anger and fear. As done in this experiential activity, the strategic decision to encourage students to share their personal experiences is consistent with Storms (2012) study outcomes, which emphasized incorporating student experiences can be used as a starting point to examine social justice issues when done in a safe, trusting environment.

Studies have indicated students enrolled in courses that discuss or focus on social justice in a trusting environment can increase the commitment and confidence to take action—to teach difficult content (Dover, 2009; Storms, 2012; Villegas, 2005). It is possible that some preservice teachers will become immobilized by feelings of guilt, fear

of using inappropriate terminology or revealing their prejudices. As teacher educators, we can remind students that we are all at fault for having misinformation or biases and it is how we choose to acknowledge this misunderstanding that matters (Bell et al., 2016). One way to help students reveal and overcome their biases and fears may be through sharing our own struggles with diversity, such as I did in the methodology course when speaking about my experiences as a white, Jewish woman (Bell et al., 2016).

In recognizing the minimal amount of lessons with social justice content provided to preservice teachers during their undergraduate course work, this research suggests the positioning of learning communities infused into teacher education programs, which can provide comfort, trust and an atmosphere to understand how to teach for social justice.

### **Sense of Belonging in the Practicum**

Even with the sense of belonging and success experienced in creating a learning community within the methodology course itself, the preservice teachers did not sustain the agency or competence to build learning communities in the practicum classroom based on the support structures available to them during their practicum experience. Grounded on the observational data, reflections and interviews, when using Carver's (1996) ABC's of student experience, the students attached to the concept of belonging versus agency or competence and this desire to belong transferred into their practicum assignment. The innate drive to want to belong to a community ultimately impacted the preservice teachers' ability to build their agency to teach for social justice and develop professional competency (McDonald, 2005; Villegas, 2007). The preservice teachers had strategically learned to desire belonging in the methodology course. They also craved

professional acceptance in the practicum environment and could most easily achieve a sense of belonging or professional acceptance through demonstrating competency with teaching skills. However, for the preservice teachers in this study, competency with teaching skills was viewed as not “rocking the boat”—adhering to the status quo.

The approach of not rocking the boat may have provided the students a perceived competence, but ultimately, inhibited their agency from engaging students in experiential lessons to build community and explore social justice issues. By not challenging the status quo coupled with their desire for professional acceptance from colleagues, made it difficult for the preservice teachers to fully implement the experiential lessons they learned in their methodology class, build their professional agency or competently teach for social justice.

### **Competence**

The need to infuse experiential learning, community building and teaching for social justice into the preservice teachers daily practice was inherently linked to their competence to create learning experiences focused on these topics in their practicum classroom. Students validated their competence to teach for social justice in the methodology class through their demonstrated ability to actively participate in activities and discussions focused on social justice coupled with their capacity to develop and lead experiential lessons for promotion of social justice. However, after the conclusion of the methodology course, the preservice teachers competence to teach for social justice was limited due to their perceived incompetence to teach social studies and social justice



content, limited exposure to social justice content and methods, a desire to belong and achieve professional acceptance, lack of support they received in their practicum setting to engage their students in experiential methods and the ability to regularly implement experiential lessons learned. In an attempt to shed light on how preservice teachers operationalize teaching for social justice in their practicum setting, teacher educators must consider how these potential barriers were influential.

### **Building Competence**

To gain competence with teaching for social justice, educators must engage students in uncomfortable conversations about social justice issues and their preconceived perceptions regarding race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender and equality (Kumashiro, 2004). Nevertheless, to incite change, educators need to reflect on their subconscious resistance to expanding their perspectives. Preservice teachers often have difficulty teaching for social justice, because dismantling the American status quo frequently begins with recognizing personal biases and the infiltration into the classroom environment (Villegas, 2007). Preservice teachers often lack the experience in questioning stereotypes, cultural norms and hegemonic references, because of a lack of personal experience teaching for social justice. Recognizing a lack of experience to teach for social justice was expressed in the “unknown fears,” Angie, Casey and Hayli all shared at the beginning of the semester during the norm setting process. Not only were they concerned about teaching for social justice, but their fears were rooted in an inability to teach social studies because they lacked teaching competence with social studies content.

With each passing week, as I led the students through experiential activities and social justice discussions, the acceptance of social studies education began to shift as well as their confidence to teach social studies with experiential methodology for the purpose of teaching social justice. The preservice teachers felt motivated to learn new and innovative methodologies, interdisciplinary connections, and engaging lessons to avoid rote memorization (Casey, Hayli, I). Experiential learning became the norm in the methodology class and through experiential means; we grew into a high-functioning learning community. At the onset of the semester, incorporating teambuilding activities to welcome students into the learning environment illustrated what students could expect from an inclusive classroom, which stresses mutual respect, attentive listening and acknowledging that everyone's participation is imperative (Adams, 2016; D. A. Kolb, 1984).

Teacher educators must be well versed in addressing the fears expressed by preservice teachers when teaching for social justice, because if the fears are not replaced with innovative methods and tools to dispel them, such as the use of learning communities to address social inequity, teachers may continue to subconsciously condone discriminatory practices and diminish the competence of the preservice teacher to teach for social justice (McDonald, 2005). As Grant and Sleeter (1997) assert, "One cannot choose not to choose, because to accept the status quo is also to make a choice" (p. 224). Teacher educators must be cognizant of scaffolding the skills to expose preservice teachers on how to question societal practices of injustice and recognize these practices, which foster inequality within their individual schools (Grant & Sleeter, 2006).

All of the preservice teachers in this study had limited exposure to social justice content, terminology or actions steps on how to effectively teach for social justice in the elementary classroom before taking their methodology course.

The question remains as to why the preservice teachers in this study had such limited exposure and confidence to teach social justice content at the completion of their undergraduate coursework, even after participating in a diversity course. However, this finding may not be that surprising with the awareness that students receive limited exposure to social justice content in teacher education programs across the U.S. (Dover, 2009; McDonald, 2007). Villegas (2007) suggests teaching for social justice must be present throughout the preservice coursework to effectively build the competence to navigate racial, ethnic or socio-political issues with students. Without continual and early exposure to social justice concepts, preservice teachers have difficulty incorporating social justice concepts into their practicum setting and future professional practice (Villegas, 2007).

### **Conceptual Competence**

The preservice teachers acknowledged in their interviews 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, redefining their competence. However, this study documented the desire to belong to a learning community, which negatively impacted the further development of the preservice teacher's competence to teach for social justice using experiential methods.

The student's desire to belong and to "not rock the boat" may have resulted in reshaping their conceptual competence in the practicum setting. Simply, they did not see the applicability of applying their newfound skills in an environment that did not accept or promote the use of experiential methods and teaching for social justice.

### **Competence in Action**

As the preservice teachers entered their practicum assignments it became clear to them there were obstacles they would have to overcome in order deliver experiential lessons and gain competence with these skills. The early development of competence in the methodology class with newly acquired skills arose from a community built on trust, collaboration, dialogue on social justice issues and a shared commitment to inclusivity (Pantić, 2015). However, when the students attempted to put their competence into action in their practicum setting, several preservice teachers in this study voiced that even though they wanted to teach for social justice with experiential methods, they were unable because their practicum classroom lacked a community built on trust and collaboration. As Casey shared in her final interview, her confidence in particular to implement his experiential methods was compromised because of a lack of trust from her cooperating teacher to implement these types of methods.

### **Implications for Teacher Education Programs**

The findings of this study demonstrated that preservice teachers' desire to seek professional acceptance from their practicum colleagues significantly diminished the development and operationalization of their agency, sense of belonging in the practicum

environment, and confidence in application of their methodology coursework. Seeking professional acceptance might not have reduced preservice teacher's ability to develop in these areas if their practicum experience was more supportive of experiential methodologies for teaching social justice. Therefore, several key questions need to be addressed. One, how can teacher education programs support preservice teacher agency development to combat the need for professional acceptance? Two, how can teacher education programs create a sense of belonging in the practicum environment to displace the drive for professional acceptance of traditional teaching norms? Finally, how can teacher education programs cultivate preservice teacher's conceptualization of professional competence rather than the reliance on perceived professional acceptance?

The literature and results of this study provides a glimpse of the disconnect between the theory and practice of teacher education and the development of teaching skills in the practicum experience, which fails to adequately prepare preservice teachers for the realities of teaching and in turn impacts their professional competence (McDonald, 2005; Morine-Dersheimer, 1987; Pantić, 2015).

### **Agency Development Gives Way to Professional Acceptance**

Both the university classroom and practicum environment must align to empower teachers to work cooperatively and collaboratively to develop agency to dialogue about complex social justice issues or innovative methods (Ukpokodu, 2007). The misalignment between the methodology coursework and expectations in the practicum classroom hindered the development of the preservice teachers and in turn impacted the

need for professional acceptance from colleagues. Nieto (2000) challenges educators to function as colleagues who value debate, critique, and challenge each other to move beyond stereotypical practices and mindsets in order to develop the ability to recognize when the desire to belong supersedes a preservice teacher's agency to teach innovative methods. Intentionally, this is why the methods course was crafted to push students to practice having productive, collegial relationships with classmates, their practicum colleagues and myself so that they would learn how to harness their professional agency when practicing new skills.

Even though the preservice teachers in this study entered into their practicum assignments with increased agency to tackle social justice issues, the support mechanisms from the teachers in the practicum setting were deficient to sustain individual agency development. Several of the preservice teachers in this study craved to collaborate professionally in the practicum setting, so they could to continue to learn how to push past stereotypical norms, but their agency development was stifled due to variables not necessarily within their control, such as collegial buy-in and incongruent expectations between the preservice teachers and practicum sites.

Collegial buy-in in may be difficult to achieve initially, because collaborative and active learning styles are often not emphasized nor modeled within the school environment, as experienced by several of the preservice teachers in this study (McKenzie, 2000; Priest, 1986). The preservice teachers that received minimal support within the practicum environment had difficulty sustaining their agency development in relation to teaching for social justice or using experiential methods to enhance the sense

of community in the classroom. Specifically, these preservice teachers did not see experiential methods utilized nor attention given to social justice issues in the practicum setting, so in turn the desire for professional acceptance gave way to not practicing the new techniques they had learned in their university coursework. Particularly, Casey yearned for opportunities to collaborate on how to increase community utilizing experiential methods with her practicum classroom, but her cooperating teacher did not share the same desire. A lack of exposure and understanding with experiential methods of teaching many cause faculties to “be afraid of losing control of the classroom or not being perceived as an expert” (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, p. 75), so the desire to experiment with innovative methods may be thwarted. Based on Casey’s reflections during her interview, it was apparent that her cooperating teacher did not support her experimenting with innovative methods due to the stringent climate within the classroom and the desire to keep control over the students.

If the preservice teacher’s agency development is not developed in the practicum setting where they are provided genuine real-life experiences to apply their university coursework and skills, several implications arise. One, these young educators may not ever apply the current and accepted teaching methodologies they were taught in their coursework to further the learning of their students, specifically around social justice issues. On the contrary, the preservice teachers may adopt outdated and ineffective teaching practices and norms that may thwart the learning of their students. Moreover, the students will ultimately lack awareness of social justice issues and the implications of these issues to society. Therefore, the students will not be moved to be agents of social

justice change. This will stifle their ability to influence positive change on social justice issues, and, maybe even worse, perpetuate social justice inequality. Consequently, the following recommendations are provided to address these implications:

1. Teacher education programs should provide their practicum cooperating teacher's professional education on the innovative, and possibly unfamiliar methodology, that is being taught in their programs and how best to support its use by their preservice teachers. For example, cooperating teachers in this study could have benefited from targeted support and training on teaching for social justice, community building and the use of innovative experiential methodologies.
2. Preservice teachers should be provided strategies in their teacher education programs of how to work with practicum teachers and administrators who may not be open to utilization of experiential methodologies for the teaching of social justice and;
3. Teacher education program should work with their practicum sites and respective teachers to develop clear expectations of how to support the development of preservice student agency. Specific to this study, conversations between faculty and cooperating teachers/administrators would have been beneficial to frontload expectations from all stakeholders prior to the preservice teachers beginning their practicum assignments to ensure agency development of preservice teachers.

### **Collegial Support and Belonging**

The methodology class became a learning community through experiential methods that fostered a sense of belonging among the preservice teachers. Due to the development of positive interpersonal relationships among the students, the foundation to teach for social justice was formed. As the preservice teachers moved through their practicum experiences, however, the sense of belonging they developed in the methods course to teach for social justice was displaced with a strong desire to gain professional acceptance from their practicum colleagues. The preservice teachers expressed that their drive to belong within their practicum environment often limited their experimentation



and application of the innovative methods they had learned in class, with some indicating that they feared reprisal if they did not conform to the practicum setting norms.

Cooperating teachers and administrators must remember many preservice teachers enter the practicum classroom with professional fears and anxiety, which may limit the preservice teacher's vision of what is possible and contradict the learning they received in their teacher training (Kelly & Brandes, 2010; Villegas, 2007). For example, Angie's expressed fears regarding the sensitivity of teaching social studies content in the beginning of the semester was a variable I considered as the methodology course instructor. Musset (2010) challenges teacher education programs and schools to take a shared responsibility for the transition from preservice to in-service teacher. Not only would the transition be smoother, add to stability within the environment, but most importantly it would bring the preservice and in-service teacher community together to discuss perceived fears and avenues for collaboration (Tobin & Roth, 2005).

Ideally, the relationship between the cooperating and preservice teacher should be supportive, encouraging and incite a reciprocal sense of belonging. Most practicums in teacher education encourage replication of the status quo rather than asking critical questions and implementing innovative methodology through active reflective practices (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Casey's practicum experience highlights the implications from replicating the status quo, which can occur from a disengaged cooperating teacher. Casey struggled to gain support and respect from her cooperating teacher, so, in turn, did not benefit from a strong collegial model to help teach innovative or socially just practices—so, she chose “not to rock the boat.” Ultimately, Casey sacrificed her agency and

reshaped her competence to build a sense of belonging and gain professional acceptance from her colleagues in the practicum setting.

If a supportive and open environment is not present for preservice teachers in the practicum setting, their ideals and practices of teaching they gained in their University coursework may be displaced by a drive to conform to an environment which is not supportive, therefore, causing them to abandon their drive to practice their newfound teaching skills, thereby, resulting in further discord between what they felt they should do as teachers and what the cooperating teacher guide them do. The lack of support and discord that results between both parties lends to a lack of reinforcement in the preservice teachers newfound teaching skills and application of their acquired knowledge. Thus, further diminishing their student's experience and learning, advancement of innovative teaching practices that could bolster learning communities, but most importantly, entrench in the preservice teacher's mindset that what they learned in their university coursework is not applicable in the real-world of teaching, limiting their drive and desire to learn and implement new teaching practices in the future.

To combat these implications and to foster a sense of belonging for preservice teachers in their practicum environment to displace the drive for professional acceptance of traditional teaching norms, the following recommendations are provided.

1. Teacher education programs should educate practicum cooperating teachers on the fears and anxieties their preservice teachers may possess when moving from the classroom to the practicum setting for the cooperating teacher to address potential fears and anxieties early to prevent the student from conforming for the sake of conforming and;
2. Teacher education programs should facilitate on-going dialogue with their cooperating teachers and administrative teams on how they are promoting their preservice teachers to implement the teaching methodologies they have

learned in the classroom. These conversations could be deliberately facilitated at the beginning of semester between the University faculty and practicum sites.

### **Ability to Practice Competence**

In designing the methodology course, I distinctly wanted to prepare preservice teachers to use experiential methods to create a sense of belonging to build learning communities and in turn create access to teach for social justice. Ultimately training teachers to teach for social justice coupled with building their competence to do so is our responsibility as teacher educators (Storms, 2012; Villegas, 2007). To build preservice teacher's competence while learning to teach is a delicate and intricate process, due to past experiences, feelings of vulnerability and the desire for professional acceptance among new teachers. As expressed by the majority of preservice teachers in this study, they were nervous about teaching social studies and had misconstrued notions of social justice issues. 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, but 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 (A. Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991), 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 but more importantly, they would have felt safe "rocking the boat."

Educators need time to develop the skills and attributes to become competent

teachers, because of the complexity and contextual demands of the position (Villegas, 2007). The role of the preservice teacher is complicated because as Darling-Hammond (2006, p.305) notes, “teachers have to develop the skills to learn from practice as well as learn for practice.” As teacher educators, we are aware of the time it takes to digest and reproduce teaching methods with fidelity. Kolb & Kolb (2008) substantiate the importance of providing time to grow by making space for the “development of expertise” (p.44). Deep learning is facilitated by deliberate, recursive practices that are related to the preservice teacher’s goals (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). The more opportunities to practice a learned skill, the greater likelihood the method will be replicated in a future classroom.

Experiential learning is predicated on having experiences over time where students can learn and test their assumptions (D. A. Kolb, 1984). “All learning is relearning” (D. A. Kolb, 1984, p. 11). Access to continual practice opportunities was a critical link between time spent in the methods course itself versus the practicum classroom. Based on the data, the student’s ability to incorporate experiential lessons or directly teach for social justice was extremely difficult because of a lack of continuous opportunities to teach these kinds of lessons in the practicum. As observed in this study, by not having a continuous cycle of learning, it has serious educational implications (Kolb, 1984) for the solidification of abstract conceptualizations, such as teaching for social justice in this study.

Teacher education programs depend on practicum experiences to expose preservice teachers to the realities of teaching as well as providing the space to practice

newly acquired tools and methods, which might contradict preexisting knowledge. “Practicum experience is often regarded as the most significant part of teacher preparation” (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Practicums must be powerful enough to break a preservice teachers’ conditioning by enabling them to understand that teaching is or can be different from their own experiences as a student (Villegas, 2007). How can we as teacher educators work to combat inaccurate or ineffective preexisting paradigms of teaching and learning? Darling-Hammond (2006) recommends University courses should coincide with practicum experiences. Unlike the methodology course I taught, which was structured with nine-weeks of in class sessions and four-weeks of a practicum experience after the completion of the in-class meetings. The prescribed schedule was a detriment to the preservice teachers and a contributing factor in their inability to fully incorporate experiential methods into the practicum classroom.

While all participants in this study stated they received some help or support from their cooperating teachers, such as basic management strategies, planning teaching schedules, and classroom organization, they also expressed they had not received any guidance on how to address issues of diversity and social justice with students. In each preservice teacher’s interview with their cooperating teacher, the data illuminated the cooperating teachers had little interest or experience with teaching diverse or social justice topics. Limited experience and competency with teaching for social justice among the cooperating teachers should be considered a significant problem, because of the implications for the preservice teacher (McDonald, 2005). With the current demands and expectations of teachers to address issues of diversity, teaching for social justice skills

must be developed to engage in this kind of learning with students. If the appropriate skills are not developed students (and teachers) will be deficient in teaching social justice issues and meeting the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century educator. They simply will not be competent educators. In a time when the U.S. education system and its teaching practices are viewed by both the private and public sectors as insufficient to meet the 21st century demands of students, we surely do not need more incompetent teachers or be unknowingly fostering the creation of more of them. When teachers are viewed and found to be competent educators, the seeking of support and funding for our educational system will be more likely to occur and investment in innovative teaching practices will ensue, bolstering the advancement of our educational system and ultimately, the learning of those whom it attempts to reach. A sound educational system is built upon the foundation of competent educators who utilize effective teaching methodologies and without the opportunity for preservice teachers to develop this competency, the foundation of the education system will continue to be eroded eventually to the point of collapse.

The lack of experience among the cooperating teachers only fed the insecurities of the preservice teachers in relation to teaching experientially, building learning communities to teach for social justice and may have unconsciously reinforced the notion of not using active teaching methods, building community or that teaching for social justice was not important. Lastly, innovative ideas were integrated into practice only if they were determined by teachers to be valuable with their existing understanding of pedagogical content knowledge (Hughes, 2005; Villegas, 2007), which also limited the

preservice teacher's operationalization of teaching for social justice in the practicum.

In order to bolster the support and confidence in our 21<sup>st</sup> century educators and the educational system in which they practice, we must first start with cultivating a preservice teacher's conceptualization of professional competence rather than the reliance on perceived professional acceptance. To meet this challenge, the following recommendations are provided.

1. Professional development for cooperating teachers related to matters of diversity, social justice, community building and supporting a preservice teacher in developing competence with teaching methods should be infused throughout all programmatic components and be in concert with practicum sites (McDonald, 2005; Pantić, 2015; Grant & Sleeter, 2007).
2. Preservice teachers should be engrossed in their practicum assignments from the beginning of the semester with an authentic, well-trained cooperating teacher, in order to make applicable connections to the methodology content and more time to enact new learning into the practicum setting (Bullough et al., 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2006; McDonald, 2005).
3. University teacher education programs can make deliberate, purposeful choices when partnering with practicum school sites. Directly related to the teacher education program in this study, several charter schools are located in the vicinity of the university, which embraces experiential methodology (i.e. Maria Montessori Academy, Venture Academy, Promontory Academy, Edith Bowen Laboratory School) and has a stated mission aligned to social justice goals.

Preservice teachers' teaching practices are more likely influenced by cooperating teachers during practicums than by teacher education courses, which teacher educators must acknowledge. An effective mentor teacher has the potential to guide a preservice teacher to use practicum experiences to meet the challenges that must be addressed to lead towards social and personal responsibility, self-confidence, interdependence, self-reliance and personal satisfaction (Carver, 1996). Thus, the findings of this study suggest professional development for in-service teachers and deliberate school partnerships are a

critical piece of the teacher education puzzle if we want preservice teachers to utilize innovative methods to build learning communities to teach for social justice.

### **Summary**

Experiential education methodologies have the potential to be used as a tool to create learning communities in order to enhance the ability to teach for social justice. In this specific research study, practicum students underwent a transformative, communal growth experience within a methodology class where a sense of belonging was created. Time was spent discussing frameworks behind experiential methods with the anticipated goal that students would develop the skills to form a learning community and build their competence with innovative methods to teach for social justice. However, the preservice teachers were met with challenges, such as time constraints, diminished competence, limited professional agency, and lack of support from colleagues, which impeded the full actualization of this goal. Teacher education programs can address these challenges through the allocation of substantial time and resources to develop both the preservice teacher and cooperating teacher's experiential methodology skills within the practicum classroom, ensure that opportunities frequently exist to dialogue about learning outcomes with colleagues, embed multiple chances in the curriculum to practice new skills in the practicum setting and lastly, but most important regularly assess the amount of collegial support provided to preservice teachers to apply new innovative methodologies for the transfer of learning from university coursework to the practicum environment.

In spite of 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.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

*We need others to complement and develop our own expertise. This collective character of knowledge does not mean that individuals don't count. In fact, the best communities welcome strong personalities and encourage disagreements and debates.*

(Wegner, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 9)

All too often, preservice teachers enter into schools with limited ability to create a classroom environment open to dialogue on critical social justice issues (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 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.

Data analyzed from this study suggested experiential education infused into a social studies methodology course could 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. However, 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. As the instructor for the methodology class and primary researcher, I would recommend the following strategies be employed to create

learning communities experientially to teach for social justice.

- Set norms with the class by students actively participating in the process (i.e. full value contract) from the onset of the course and revisit norms often.
- Continually model strategies to debrief experiential activities in order 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.
- Practicum experiences should be embedded throughout the semester, not just during the final weeks of a course or random visits scheduled.
- Consistency in practicum expectations and substantial time allocated to teaching a variety of methods are critical for 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.

This case study has raised additional questions for teacher education programs about 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; this case study relied heavily on self-report data gathered from the preservice teachers. Future studies need to include observations of practicum teaching in order 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.

As the demographics of American society continue to change, and the complexity and diversity of students' needs continue to escalate, teacher educators must recognize the need to provide superior quality, research-based, ongoing, job-embedded, training, and development for preservice and in-service teachers. The research collected from this study documented how one methodology course attempted to add to the practices, perceptions, and skills of preservice teachers to teach for social justice. The findings of this study are significant; not only for the teacher educators where the study was conducted but also for practicum sites, which must ensure collaborative, inclusive and supportive learning environments are provided for preservice teachers to engage in experiential practices to build communities that are teaching for social justice.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Teaching Social Studies Methods Syllabus



6. reflect on your decisions and actions to improve your teaching;
7. collaborate with peers, other educators and community resources to support students' learning and well-being;
8. Understand the scope of social studies, its place in a balanced and integrated curriculum, and its role in preparing active citizens.

**Methods of instruction:** “Learn by Doing”, experience-based, each other, required text and readings, shared writings and discussion.

**Attendance Expectations:** This course requires your active involvement in all activities. Therefore, students are expected to attend all class sessions and review material before each class meeting. Excused absences will be considered to be an illness, family crisis or approved instructional activity. A missed class session due to an institutional activity must be verified in writing to me in order for it to be excused. Unforeseeable absences will not be excused unless the student provides the instructor documentation and verification within one week of the missed class.

**Classroom Environment:** The essence of what we learn in this course is how to teach students to participate as knowledgeable citizens in a multicultural democracy. This knowledge suffers when voices are marginalized or shut out of the conversation because democracy thrives upon inclusion. If you are a person who enjoys sharing in groups, we value your comments very much, but please provide the space for others to share their comments as well. If you are a person who is apprehensive about commenting in group settings, please share your ideas. For this democratic environment to work, we must support each other in creating a safe environment to share our ideas even though we might disagree at times. The expression of such differences and the search for common ground is at the heart of democratic education in a multicultural society.

**Written Assignments:** Writing is a powerful form of communication. Writing standards help us better understand each other. Please observe writing standards and conventions. APA 6<sup>th</sup> edition should govern your style, format, and references. If you have questions about APA 6<sup>th</sup>, please refer to: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

**Students with Disabilities:** The Americans with Disabilities Act states: “Reasonable accommodation will be provided for all persons with disabilities in order to ensure equal participation within the program. If a student has a disability that will likely require some accommodation by the instructor, the student must contact the instructor and document the disability through the Disability Resource Center (797-2444), preferably during the first week of the course. Any request for special consideration relating to attendance, pedagogy, taking of examinations, etc., must be discussed with and approved by the instructor. In cooperation with the Disability Resource Center, course materials can be provided in alternative format, large print, audio, diskette, or Braille.”

**Academic Integrity:**

Failure to maintain academic ethics/academic honesty including the avoidance of cheating, plagiarism, collusion, and falsification will result in a failing grade in the course and may result in charges being issued, hearing being held, and/or sanctions being imposed. Any violation of the

USU Academic Integrity Policy may result in a failing grade in the course and/or withdrawal of the student's admission to the Teacher Education Program.

**Grading and Assessment:**

ELED 4050 follows the University grading system: A, A-, B+, etc. Incomplete grades will only be given for legitimate reasons such as severe illness or family crisis with 80% of course work completed.

**The instructor reserves the right to lower any grade based on lack of professional behaviors or lack of adherence to professional ethics.**

**Course Grades and Evaluation:**

1. **Class Attendance and Participation (15 pts.)**—see notes above. This also includes a variety of small classroom assignments that could be issued based on classroom needs that develop over the course of the semester (Bio Poems, Little Books, Step Books, Quick Writes, etc.).
  - **Quick Write:** There will be a variety of quick writes or mini-reflections based on a question from the readings for the week. They can be hand submitted, emailed to the instructor, or submitted via Canvas. It is due the morning of applicable class session. Responses should be no longer than a half page and should reference the readings.
2. **Textbook Evaluation (15 pts.):** Using the version of the textbook evaluation form found on Blackboard, review one social studies textbook and all related adjunct material for that text. The text audience must include U.S. students between first and sixth grades and the content must focus on social studies generally, history, civics, economics, *or* geography. Begin by reviewing the textbook in a global way (i.e., number of chapters, material covered, ancillary materials included in the package, chapter organization, etc.). Then, **examine one chapter in detail**. The chapter you select should not be the first or last chapter; instead, choose a chapter closer to the middle of the textbook so you can obtain a clear view of how students are required to study and use the text. Complete the form electronically and print out your responses. Include a comprehensive review of the text with detailed responses written in sentence format. We will be doing a brief share of these as a whole class.
3. **Lesson Plans (15 pts. Each)** - You will write two lesson plans. The lesson plans will serve four purposes. First, they will encourage you to work with the ideas presented in the readings and in class on a deeper level than reading alone affords. Second, your plans will allow you to create curriculum-based lessons that utilize creative methods. Third, your responses will help me assess your ability to apply your readings/class discussions to what you will do in your classroom. Use this site as an excellent resource to writing plans - [http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/lesson\\_plans/](http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/lesson_plans/)

**Lesson Plan 1- Multiple Perspectives or Controversial Content**

Provide an example of a historical or controversial issue that you could teach in your classroom, an issue with multiple perspectives/narratives.

**Lesson Plan 2- Experiential/Active Learning**

Create a lesson that includes an experiential/active learning approach to content acquisition—remember to engage your students in inquiry learning.

*\*\*It is essential your lesson plans incorporate other cultures, backgrounds, and positionalities in the classroom. The lessons should be culturally responsible. For example, be mindful not to denigrate a particular group, race or culture and be aware of different learning styles, ways of knowing and doing, and diverse individuals.*

4. **Team Teach (20 pts.)-** In teams you will be assigned a theme from social studies education and will need to present it to the class.
5. **Practicum Lesson (20 points) -** During practicum, at least one lesson must be taught in which you **BOLDLY** integrate social studies. This lesson may be done as social studies only or integrated with other topic(s). You will write a brief summary of this lesson along with a self-assessment. (can be one of the two from above)

Reflection must include:

- Lesson objective(s) for the social studies segment of your lesson
- Student assessment of the lesson
- Include some type of sample work from at least one student
- Reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of your lesson.
- Submit, via Canvas, a copy of your lesson plan.

**Required Reading:**

Lindquist, Tarry. (2002). *Seeing the Whole Through Social Studies* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

\*Various articles and chapters from other texts will be distributed throughout the semester.

Appendix B

Bio Poem Assignment

## BIO POEM ASSIGNMENT

### Bio Poem Template

Line 1: Your first name

---

Line 2: Four words that describe your character

---

Line 3: Brother or sister of...

---

Line 4: Lover of...(three ideas or people)

---

Line 5: Who feels...(three ideas)

---

Line 6: Who needs...(three ideas)

---

Line 7: Who gives...(three ideas)

---

Line 8: Who fears...(three ideas)

---

Line 9: Who would like to see...

---

Line 10: Resident of

---

Line 11: Your last name

---



Appendix C  
Interview Questions

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Background Questions

1. How would you characterize yourself as a student in the teacher education program?
2. Please describe your experience as a student in your teacher education program?
3. Were you familiar with the concepts of experiential education and/or social justice prior to the elementary social studies methods course? Explain.

### Programmatic

1. Provide a brief explanation of your understanding of teaching for social justice and its relation to social studies curriculum.
2. What have you learned over the course of the semester in relation to community building and teaching for social justice?
3. Do you feel that the use of experiential methods bolsters or hinders the ability to build community with the goal to teach social justice issues? Explain.
4. Heading into the practicum, did you feel encouraged to write and deliver lessons utilizing experiential methods in a social studies learning environment? Explain.
5. Share one specific example/lesson activity that resonated with you and its ability to build community experientially from a social justice perspective (one that was experienced in the methods course)?
6. Describe one experiential activity that you would *not* utilize in the classroom setting to build community and/or to teach about social justice (one that was experienced in the methods course). Explain.

### Post Practicum Questions:

1. How would you describe the experiential education experiences you had this semester?
2. Describe/reflect on the social studies lesson taught during the practicum. Where you effective in teaching for social justice, building community, teaching experientially?
3. Which specific experiential education experience resonated with you the most as a future teacher and as a current student? Which activity would you most likely use in an elementary classroom?

4. Describe how you would incorporate social justice and experiential methodology in your classroom (daily, weekly, monthly, etc.)?
5. What external supports do you feel is needed to teach in this way?
6. If you had to describe your experience(s) in this course to a friend, what would you say?
7. Did you feel that the elementary social studies methods course effectively prepared you to teach social studies concepts outside of your practicum experience? Explain.

## VITAE

STEPHANIE L. SPEICHER

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 North Ogden, Utah 84414  
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[stephaniespeicher1230@comcast.net](mailto:stephaniespeicher1230@comcast.net)

**Education**

- 2017    **Ph.D.**    *Utah State University - Curriculum & Instruction*  
 Emphasis: Experiential Learning, Cultural Studies and Social Studies  
 Education
- 2002    **M.Ed.**    *University of Maine—Educational Leadership*  
 Emphasis: Outdoor Education Training and Development
- 1995    *National Outdoor Leadership School, Lander, Wyoming*  
 Graduate of North Cascades mountaineering course
- 1993    **B.S.**    *Towson University - Social Sciences/Secondary Education*  
 Emphasis: Anthropology

**Employment Experience**

- 2013-present                    **Director Maria Montessori Academy**—public charter  
 school serving grades early childhood through Junior High  
 North Ogden, UT
- 2013-present                    **Graduate Teaching Assistant**, School of Teacher  
 Education and Leadership, Utah State University, Logan,  
 UT
- 2010-2013                        **Adjunct Faculty**, Department of Education, Weber  
 State University, Ogden, UT
- 2008–2010                        **External Consultant**—Teaching and Learning  
 Initiatives, SERC-State Education Resource Center,  
 Middletown, CT
- 2005-2010                        **Adjunct Faculty**, Sacred Heart University, Department  
 of Education, Fairfield, CT
- 2004-2010                        **Student Activity Grants Coordinator**, Adult  
 Education Middletown, CT

2002-2008	<b>Social Studies Teacher</b> , Guilford High School, Guilford, CT
1999-2001	<b>Instructor</b> , University of Maine at Presque Isle, Department of Outdoor Education and Leadership, Presque Isle, ME
1999-2001	<b>Director of Outdoor Programs International</b> , University of Maine at Presque Isle, Presque Isle, ME
1999-2004	<b>Lead Instructor</b> , Hurricane Island Outward Bound School, Newry, ME
1999-2002	<b>Lead Instructor</b> , Thompson Island Outward Bound School, Boston, MA
1994-1997	<b>Social Studies Teacher</b> , Springbrook High School, Silver Spring, MD
1993-1994	<b>Experiential Educator</b> , Genesee Outdoor Learning Center, Parkton, MD

## Research and Scholarly Activities

### Research Themes

- Exploring and implementing the use of experiential education methodology to build social justice agency in preservice social studies teachers
- Analyzing outdoor education curriculum for instances of social justice agency acquisition and development

### Journal Articles (Peer Reviewed)

Speicher, S., & Clark, J. S. (2014). Active Content Acquisition: Utilizing Low Ropes Course Initiatives to Teach Social Studies Concepts. *Oregon Journal of the Social Studies*, 48.

### Journal Articles (in preparation)

Speicher, S. & Clark, J. S. (in preparation). Content Analysis of Gender Equity in Outdoor Education Curriculum.

Speicher, S. & Clark, J. S. (in preparation). Social Studies Developing Social Justice—Cultivating Preservice Teachers Experientially.

Speicher, S. (in preparation). Empowering Women on a Challenge Course: Building Agency with Social Studies Content.

### Conference Proceedings

Speicher, S. (2014). Social Studies Developing Social Justice—Cultivating Preservice Teachers Experientially. Proceedings of the 2014 International Association of Experiential Education Conference, Chattanooga, TN.

### Book Review

Clark, J. S. & **Speicher, S.** (2014) *The Memory Hole*. *Teachers College Record*.  
<http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=17789>.

### Newsletters

Speicher, S. (1998). A New Voice And Energy. *Mid-Atlantic Currents: Newsletter of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Association for Experiential Education*, page 3.

Speicher, S. (2001) The Northeast Regional Conference 2001. *The Nor'easter Newsletter of the Northeast Region of the Association For Experiential Education*, Vol.8, No.1, page 7.

Speicher, S. (2001) Back To Basics, Summary and Notes From the Incoming Chair. *The Nor'easter: Newsletter of the Northeast Region of the Association For Experiential Education*, Vol.8, No.1, pages 1--2.

Speicher, S. (2001) Notes From The Chair. *The Nor'easter: Newsletter of the Northeast Region of the Association For Experiential Education*, Vol.8, No.2, page 1.

### Grants

2008—2010                      **Co-Investigator**, *21st Century Workforce Preparation and the Transition to Postsecondary Education*, Middletown Adult Education, Department of Workforce Services Grant - State of CT  
 Amount: \$100,000

### Presentations

Speicher, S. (February, 2017). Enhancing Social Justice in the Classroom Experientially. Montessori Education Programs International Conference, Kiawah Island, SC

Speicher, S. (February, 2016). Classroom Alive! Montessori Education Programs International Conference, Kiawah Island, SC.

Speicher, S. (October, 2015). Sacred Spaces. ActivatEE talk at the Association for Experiential Education Conference, Portland, OR.

Speicher, S. (October, 2014). Social Studies Developing Social Justice—Cultivating Preservice Teachers Experientially. Poster at the International Association for Experiential Education Conference, Chattanooga, TN.

Clark, J. S., Camicia, S. P., Lee, H., **Speicher, S.**, Di Stefano, M., & Zhu, J. (April, 2014). Content analysis of Theory and Research and Social Education and The Social Studies. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA.

- Clark, J. S., Camicia, S. P., Lee, H., **Speicher, S.**, Di Stefano, M., & Zhu, J. (November, 2013). Content analysis of Theory and Research and Social Education and The Social Studies. Presentation at the College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA) of the National Council for the Social Studies, St. Louis, Mo.
- Speicher, S. (October, 2013). Making It Real—Lesson Planning for the Experiential Classroom. Presentation at the International Association for Experiential Education Conference, Denver, CO.
- Speicher, S. (November, 2012). Classroom Alive! Presentation at the International Association for Experiential Education Conference. Madison, WI.
- Speicher, S. (February, 2012). Classroom Alive! Presentation at the Future Educators of America Conference, Baltimore, MD.
- Speicher, S. (July, 2011). Classroom Alive! Presentation at the Utah Future Educators of America Conference, Ogden, UT.
- Speicher, S. (January, 2011). Putting the Pieces Together—Building and Leading an Effective Team. Presentation at the Weber State Student Leadership Conference, Ogden, UT.
- Speicher, S. (April, 2010). An Interactive Curriculum Experience: Career Awareness in the ELL and CDP Program. Presentation at the Connecticut Adult Education Conference, Old Saybrook, CT.
- Speicher, S. (January, 2007). Putting the Pieces Together—Building and Leading and Effective Teams. Presentation at the Student Leadership Conference –Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.
- Speicher, S. (April, 2002). Climbing to New Heights: An Interdisciplinary Approach to a University Mountaineering Experience. Presentation at the International Association of Experiential Education, St. Paul, MN.
- Speicher, S. (March, 2001). Expanding the Four Walls: Experimenting with Games and Initiatives. Presentation at the Maine Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance Conference, Portland, ME.
- Speicher, S. (January, 2000). Women in Outdoor Leadership. Presentation at the Maine State Student Leadership Conference. Orono, ME.
- Speicher, S. (January, 2000). Ice Breakers and Team Building Activities for Group Leaders: Get Ready to Laugh and Learn. Presentation at the Maine State Leadership Conference, Orono, ME.
- Speicher, S. (April, 1998). Rock Climbing Self-Rescue Seminar. Presentation at the Association for Experiential Education Mid-Atlantic Conference. Frostburg, MD.

## Teaching and Field Advising

### Utah State University (Undergraduate)

ELED 4050	Elementary Social Studies Methods (face to face and Online)
SCED 3300/4300	Social Studies Clinical
SCED 3500	Teaching Social Studies Methods - Secondary
SCED 5500	Student Teaching Seminar

### Weber State University (Undergraduate)

EDUC 3280	Social Studies Methods for Elementary Education
EDUC 4840	Student Teacher Advisement
REC 3840	Therapeutic and Social Recreation
REC 4550	Outdoor Education Theory and Methodology
UNIV 1105	Foundations of College Success

### Sacred Heart University (Masters Graduate Program)

ED 523	Multicultural Education
ED 550	History of Education in the U.S.

### University of Maine at Presque Isle (Undergraduate)

REC 234	Outdoor Pursuits I
REC 235	Outdoor Pursuits II
REC 122	Leadership Training in Recreation
REC 232	Recreational Activities and Planning

### K-12

Guilford High School	AP Human Geography, World Humanities
Springbrook High School	Government, U.S. History, Cultural and Physical
Anthropology,	Civil and Criminal Law (ELL), Current Issues



## Selected Awards, Honors, and Recognition

2016	Nomination for Administrator of the Year, Utah Association of Public Charter Schools
2012	Honorable Mention for Master Teacher of the Year Weber State University, Ogden, Utah
2007	Honored by <i>Who's Who Among America's Teachers</i>
2006	Honored by <i>Who's Who of American Women</i> Honored by <i>Outstanding American Teachers</i>
2004	Honored by <i>Who's Who Among America's Teachers</i>
2003	Teacher of the Year, Guilford High School, Guilford, CT
2001	Nomination for Outstanding Teacher of the Year University of Maine at Presque Isle, Maine
2000	Outstanding Teacher of the Year University of Maine at Presque Isle, Presque Isle, Maine
1993	Honorable Mention for Outstanding Woman of the Year Towson University, Towson, Maryland

## Leadership

2004—2010	<b>BEST—Beginning Educator Support and Training Program Mentor</b> , Connecticut State Department of Education
2001-2003	<b>Northeast Region Chair</b> , Association for Experiential Education
2000-2001	<b>Northeast Conference Convener</b> , Association for Experiential Education
1999—2001	<b>Northeast Regional Representative</b> , Association for Experiential Education

## Professional Consulting

2001	<b>MSAD #24</b> —Taught physical education teachers how to build and utilize a repertoire of experiential activities to maximize learning with students while maintaining an energizing environment for their profession.
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- 2000-2006 **Teamworks International**—(engagements included: Deutsche Bank Securities, The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, World Bank/IFC, New York City Public Schools)
- 2000 **Eastern Maine Healthcare**—Outdoor adventure to promote positive communication and connections between team members.
- 2000 **MSAD #29**—Educators from a variety of levels and disciplines in seminars focusing on teambuilding, leadership, group dynamics, communication/information exchange, action plans, problem solving, decision-making and change management and its application to the traditional classroom.
- 1998-2006 **Edgework Consulting** (engagements included: MIT-Sloan Business School, Boston University, MIT Leadership Center, Consigli, and Boston College)

## Committees

- 2015 –present Member, Student Teacher Advisory Committee, Utah State University
- 2011-present **Chair**, Middle School Committee, Maria Montessori Academy
- 2013-present **Chair**, Accreditation Committee, Maria Montessori Academy
- 2002–2007 **Member**, Curriculum Committee, Guilford High School,
- 2002–2003 **Member**, School Climate Committee, Guilford High School
- 1999-2001 **Member**, Marketing Committee, University of Maine at Presque Isle
- 1999-2001 **Advisory Board Member**, The Aroostook Medical Center Women’s Advisory Board, Presque Isle, Maine
- 1999-2001 **Board Member**, International Appalachian Trail

## Service

2016	<b>Accreditation Team Member</b> , AdvancED, Weber High School
2015	<b>Accreditation Team Member</b> , AdvancED, Ben Lomond High School
2015	<b>Accreditation Team Member</b> , AdvancED, Ogden High
2014	<b>Workshop Reviewer</b> , 2014 International Conference for Experiential Education
2011-2013	<b>Board Member</b> , Maria Montessori Academy Charter School
2011	<b>Invited Facilitator</b> , College and Career Planning, Ogden High School, Ogden, UT
2010	<b>Guest Lecturer</b> , Environmental Education, Maria Montessori Academy, North Ogden, UT
2003	<b>Guest Lecturer</b> , Healthy Lifestyles, American Cancer Society, Shelton, CT
2001	<b>Invited Facilitator</b> , Teambuilding, Van Buren Middle School, Van Buren, ME
2000	<b>Invited Facilitator</b> , Teambuilding, Girl Scouts of America, Presque Isle, ME
2000	<b>Invited Facilitator</b> , Teambuilding, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Presque Isle, ME
1999-2001	<b>Volunteer Educator</b> , CPR/First Aid, American Red Cross, Presque Isle, ME
1999-2001	<b>Volunteer Ski Patrol</b> , National Ski Patrol, Big Rock Mountain, Mars Hill, ME

## Professional Affiliations

American Educational Research Association (Division B, Division K, Research in Social Studies Education Special Interest Group (SIG), Peace Education SIG, Research on Women and Education SIG

Association for Experiential Education National Council for the Social Studies Utah Montessori Council