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**Engaging Students in Autobiographical Critique as a Social Justice Tool:
Narratives of Deconstructing and Reconstructing Meritocracy and Privilege with
Pre-service Teachers**

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Abstract:

This self-study involves instructors of a Social Justice in Education course at a large university who engaged pre-service teacher education students with assignments intended to solicit their critical self-reflection and to facilitate an awareness of themselves as sociocultural beings. Our work responds to the continued need to involve pre-service teachers in experiences that foster critical consciousness and cognizance of their own socialization. For the assignments, students were first asked to describe key moments in their educational experience in the form of a multimedia submission and reflection. After a semester of critical discussions and readings, students were then asked to re-visit their initial projects and critique those using course concepts. In addition, they were prompted to include plans for themselves as future social justice educators. In this paper, we analyze those student submissions, and we find that many reached new conclusions about social justice topics such as race and gender, critiqued personal and social artifacts, and recognized the connections between privilege and meritocracy. Despite the limitations in class size and structure, we affirm the potential value of a multi-stage autobiography assignment. We also explore instances of student resistance, wherein students avoided the assigned task and our requirement for self-reflection. We conclude by offering implications for teacher education and posit considerations for future adaptations of the assignment, including the necessity to engage students in opportunities to take social action and to move beyond critique.

Key Words: Social Justice Education, Autobiography, Multimedia

Engaging Students in Autobiographical Critique as a Social Justice Tool: Narratives of Deconstructing and Reconstructing Meritocracy and Privilege with Pre-service Teachers

The short history of social justice in education is one wrought with recognition and rupture. After the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s, the identification of whiteness as pervasive in our school systems grew (Ladson-Billings, 1999) and universities thus began to acknowledge “the necessity of embedding social justice issues within the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teacher education” (Grant & Agosto, 2008). This was attempted, however, through what became multicultural education courses that were celebratory in nature, rather than critical (Banks, 1993). That is, social justice was embraced as long as it did not offend white sensibilities about their (our) role in perpetuating injustice. The failure to enact a more fully critical approach led to some alteration in teacher education and, as a result, efforts are now aimed at “making social change and activism central to the vision of teaching and learning promoted,” (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009, p. 597). Yet, the battle wages on. For example, in 2000, NCATE labeled social justice as a desirable professional disposition, but in 2006 removed (Kumashiro, 2008) the language, only to then reinstate it for 2015 reports (Alsup & miller, 2014). Now that the social justice admonition has been restored, teacher educators continue to posit ways to cultivate equity-oriented stances and practices with pre-service teachers. Such was our purpose in the project described here: We wanted to explore an innovative way to engage students with social justice education through examining their own stories, which we believe is a crucial first step in any experience that aspires to develop critically minded individuals. We wanted to help our students *see* inequities, particularly as they pertained to their own histories and experiences.

We use ‘social justice’ throughout the remainder of this article and in our work with students to mean a commitment to dismantling structures of oppression and to pursuing actions with the goal of social change. The concept of social justice implies a recognition that we live in an unequal and stratified society and that racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and heteronormativity are pervasive but are often normalized. Education that is aimed at promoting social justice “does not merely examine difference or diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality,” (Hackman, 2005, p. 104). In particular, teacher education for social justice takes “the position that teachers can and should be both educators and advocates who are committed to the democratic ideal and to diminishing existing inequities in school and society by helping to redistribute educational opportunities” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 350) In what follows, we discuss our efforts in our social justice course and what effects were evident.

Autobiography in Social Justice Education

Within the work of social justice education, the importance and justification for teacher candidates to engage in their own critical reflection is now noted throughout the growing body of literature. These calls stem from the need to have the predominately white, middle class, female population of pre-service teachers begin to understand their own socialization (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) so that they can be open to learning about the diversity of the students with whom they will work and who are likely different from themselves (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Because beliefs can act as filters for new knowledge (Garmon, 2004; Tatto, 1996) as well as affect future practice (Delpit, 2012; Holt-Reynolds, 1992), numerous scholars have cited autobiography and critical

reflection as essential components to social justice education (Causey, Thomas, Armento, 1999; Cochran-Smith 1995; Gay, 2010; Grant, 1991; Zeichner, 1992). The task for teacher educators in foundational courses, charged with preparing those candidates for equity work, is how to summon these prior experiences into our classrooms and have students examine them in productive ways.

As a step in this direction, teacher educators have engaged students in autobiographical work that generally takes the form of writing assignments in which students are required to explore their own backgrounds and socialization, including how they view others, since some students may not recognize that they have a cultural identity (Nieto, 2000). Gay (2010) proposes beginning a program or course with a similar examination of attitudes and beliefs, writing, “it is inconceivable to me that teachers who have negative beliefs about ethnically diverse students and their cultural heritages as valid and viable educational resources can relate to them positively in personal and instructional interactions” (p. 150). Thus, if we hope to promote future teachers who can enact culturally responsive, caring and safe classrooms, we should look first to how these candidates perceive those students. Uncovering one’s beliefs about diversity and achieving self-knowledge (Britzman, 2000) is often uncomfortable for students (McIntyre, 1997, 2002, Nieto, 2000); yet, as hooks (1994) declares, “we have to learn how to appreciate difficulty, too, as a state of intellectual development” (p. 154).

This use of autobiography, narrative, and critical reflection in teacher education classrooms serves a number of social justice goals. In some arenas, the target is to confront students’ racial beliefs. Cochran-Smith (1995, 2000) has described assignments in which she asks preservice teachers to construct personal narratives about the

experiences which molded their views of race and culture, and Gay (2010) expands upon traditional narrative work by inviting students to compose dialogic poems on their “ethnicity, culture, and individuality,” to create mixed-media posters to convey their identities, and to pack a “metaphorical suitcase of things they would be taking on their journeys toward multicultural competence” (p. 148). Her innovative methods with autobiography are meant to open avenues for critical examination in a way that is less threatening to students. Such work with student narratives has been cited as vital especially for white pre-service teachers, whose unconscious experiences with privilege abound (McIntyre, 1997), and whose good intentions (Milner, 2011) and colorblind ideology (Cochran-Smith, 1995) need to be deconstructed.

Beyond using personal story to probe dispositions toward race, other scholars have utilized similar means to recognize class and heterosexual biases. Causey, Thomas, and Armento (1999) explored autobiographical essays with teacher candidates who illustrate classism. Vavrus (2009) employed autoethnography with pre-service teachers as a way to “provide a critically reflective space for teacher candidates to consider their teacher identity formations as shaped by their lived experiences with gender and sexuality” (p. 385). In these narratives, students revealed their memories of gender-molding events from their own educational backgrounds and explored “assumed heterosexuality” as “the norm” (p. 387), and they made plans for future curriculum with their potential students. Loutzenheiser (1998) noted the advantage of requiring students to compose a “cultural autobiography” (p. 207) to recognize how race, class, and gender have intersected in their own lives. Thus, there is vast documentation of the use of personal narrative in the literature on social justice teacher education.

Our approach, however, differs from the aforementioned summoning of autobiography in critical teacher education courses. First, while much of the literature cites the important need for autobiography with white teachers, we also believe that that such reflection is important for all aspiring teachers, including those from populations of color. Our goal was to heighten the critical consciousness (Hinchey, 2004) of our students, thus we wanted all to develop an awareness of their “social justice funds of knowledge” (miller, 2012) as well as to critique their prior experiences for holding ideological implications. Although being a pre-service teacher of color may provide a lens into the condition of being oppressed and result in teacher candidates who are explicitly committed to the work of social justice (Rios & Montecinos, 1999), it does not immediately guarantee that one will: understand all other cultures (Ramirez Wiedeman, 2002), understand the varieties of privileges within communities of color, and/or be critically reflexive. As we will illustrate, our approach spoke to both white pre-service teachers and candidates of color.

Second, Applebaum (2008) has troubled the notion of soliciting and validating experience in the pre-service classroom without critique or exploration, as interpretations of the past are ideologically informed. Applebaum (2008) writes that the questions we should ask are, “What do these interpretations make evident, and what do other interpretations conceal?” (p. 409). She asserts that these are productive questions for members of dominant as well as non-dominant groups. Our work, then, responds to Applebaum’s (2008) caution by not only calling forth students’ autobiographies for the students’ recognition of their own lenses, but by also requiring critique of the individual narrative from theoretical standpoints. Rather than just ‘telling their stories’, students

were asked to consider their personal experiences from another angle and to make visible their privilege. We turn now to a more detailed description of our work with our students and present the continuities, changes, and omissions in their autobiographical work.

The Course

As a team, we taught a *Social Justice in Education* course at a large southeastern university that engaged pre-service teacher education students with assignments intended to solicit their critical self-reflection and to facilitate an awareness of themselves as sociocultural beings. The class in which our activity occurred was composed of approximately 60 students who were all enrolled in teacher preparation programs spanning early childhood, middle grades, and secondary teaching. The class met once weekly for three hours each session. The population of students mirrored traditional demographics of teacher education courses: approximately 90% of the students were white, female, and in their late teens or early 20s. Most grew up in the state in which the university resides, and while most were middle class, their geographic origins ranged from urban to suburban to very rural.

The course instructors are also both white, one female and one male. In order to avoid the message that teachers are “all knowing, silent interrogators,” (hooks, 1994, p. 21) we shared with our students our own backgrounds, socializations, and past as well as current experiences related to course topics. One instructor frequently shared her understandings as a white woman coming to know social justice in her pre-service career. After growing up in a small, southern, conservative town, she attended the same university in which the course took place and later taught in a high school similar to the one she attended. As with most white individuals, she had the privilege to ignore systems

of oppression and the ways she colluded with them in her formative years; this began to change in her teen years, although she (and the other course instructor) expressed to students their ongoing engagement in self-interrogation to unlearn racism and question dominant culture. While a secondary English teacher in her previous career, she strove to cultivate her own and her students' critical literacies. She shared with the pre-service teachers in the course her encounters in the public school classroom, cataloging both her successes and failures with students from a variety of communities. She endeavored to bring a practical aspect to this social justice course and to remain true to her knowledge that the lived experience of being an educator for equity is difficult and complicated. Finally, she presented her own educational autobiography from her perspective as a teacher as a model for students in the course. The other course instructor, an older white male, shared his biography as well. Born of working class mountain heritage, he later worked on school desegregation in the South and continues to work for educational equity. He shared his knowledge on the construction of race and its social and political consequences with students. Not having been a teacher, this instructor spoke more from experiences in wider social movements and involvement in qualitative studies of schools and communities. He has worked in social foundations of education for many years. The course instructors share a commitment toward equity and naming oppression, and both are passionate about working with pre-service teachers to disrupt traditional notions of schooling and deficit perspectives. Both made their political positions explicit to students throughout the course so as to avoid a decontextualized or watered down version of critical education, and they frequently engaged in critical conversations with one another, knowing that "no teacher is free of . . . learned and internalized oppressions"

(Ellsworth, 1989, p. 308). Both recognized the limitations of their experiences in teaching such a course, as they could never fully know the lives of all of the students in their classrooms.

Positioned then, as white social justice educators teaching mostly white students, we realized our authority in the classroom and our precarious position of dominance as both course instructors and as white individuals. We are well-versed in the critiques of critical pedagogy and the problematic of working with students to reach a universalized goal. Instead, we wanted to create a more open-ended task that afforded our students the opportunity to examine their stories. We thus engaged students in two iterations of an autobiographical assignment meant to solicit how they thought about their personal life experiences at the beginning of our course and then how they reflected on them at the end. After attending the first class session, students were required to submit the initial autobiographical assignment for which they were to choose five artifacts such as newspaper clippings or videos to represent events, places, or people that reflected “key moments in their educational experience.” They were to present these through any medium they chose, such as PowerPoint, Prezi, video, etc. If they chose objects as representations, we asked them to include photographs of the objects for ease in submission and assessment. They were then instructed to compose a short reflection on each artifact and a summative statement on what the pieces showed *collectively*. We emphasized that each of these should culminate in an overall picture of the educational experience on which we wanted them to comment, hoping to facilitate a ‘parts to whole’ perspective.

In the third class meeting, students shared their autobiographies in small groups and discussed their experiences with one another. As a full group, we then explored what experiences were common amongst them and how they differed. Finally, we prepared them for having to return to these at the end of the course, although we waited to disclose the specifics of the concluding assignment. As the course progressed, we engaged students weekly in readings related to social justice topics, including racism, classism, sexism, genderism, and heteronormativity, operationalizing each as a socially constructed category with lived, and often devastating, ramifications. We consistently asked them to reflect, in writing, on how course readings related to their own experiences, hoping to develop habits of mind that connected these issues to them personally. We connected course readings to current school contexts, recent events, and issues in our local area as well in the broader nation. As teacher educators, we realize that the current climate of public schools often puts issues of social justice aside in order to focus more on technical aspects such as classroom management or functional literacy skills. We did not wish to ignore the oft-perceived more tangible portions of teaching and thus strove to merge the two instead of creating a dichotomy. As a result, our candidates re-wrote lesson plans from a social justice angle, discussed culturally responsive classroom management (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003), constructed additive models of student populations, and created graphics for physical spaces in which to enact their ideals. We employed a host of media, often asking students to apply the theory from the course to news clips, music videos, documentary videos of teaching, or advertisements, again in order to develop their propensities for deconstruction. Over the semester, we used Skype© to allow our students the opportunity to engage with national and international

experts on various social justice topics. In other assignments, students interviewed local educators who were involved in a type of social justice-related activism, they composed critiques of school films from a chosen social justice angle, and they reconstructed curriculum from their content or grade level area to reflect the goals of social justice. Only after all this work, after critical conversations in class and numerous equity-oriented assignments, did we direct them back to their original autobiographies.

The culminating task for the course required students to return to the original autobiography assignment and critique at least one artifact from their initial submissions using course concepts. We asked them to elucidate the ways they were influenced by broader socio-historical and political contexts in their construction of this experience as well as those that were necessary to have had the experience itself. Specifically, our task prompted them to: “Be critical of yourself and what you originally included, or of what you didn’t see initially,” as well as to “use course readings to critique and analyze this artifact.” Then, we asked them to extend their thinking with a new lens and to answer the question, “What story would you like to be told about you as a Social Justice Educator?” For this latter element, we asked for two new artifacts as representation, presented again through the multi-media modality of their choice.

Learning From Our Students

As we read our students’ final submissions, we realized they told us a great deal about the course we had set out to design, and we decided to analyze these autobiographical projects qualitatively. We investigated both the types of media students used and the ways they discussed the artifacts provided. For this paper, we focused on the students’ second and final responses to assess the ways they critiqued themselves and

the shifts, or lack thereof, in their narratives. Using HyperResearch©, we first applied a layer of open coding to note topics the students discussed. From this open coding, we then constructed categories for the referent of students' critiques. Once these were noted, we established themes from the emergent categories (Charmaz, 2006). Cases of resistance were relatively rare but we coded these for their own categories and built themes as well to note the ways that students contested the assignment.

Although we recognize that one's identity is multi-dimensional, what emerged as our analytic focus centered on race. We used students' self-identified race, the way they discursively marked themselves, for the following references. In our course, we talked with students about race as a social construct with lived consequences. We also explored race in terms of white privilege, as related to historic oppression of groups, and with regard to culturally responsive pedagogies. We engaged in ongoing conversations about the fine line between blanket generalizations based on race and the need to see people, especially students, as members of social groups (Gay, 2010). The second phase of the autobiographical assignment required students to engage in critique of one artifact from their original submissions. Thus, while it is not surprising that the majority of the students' responses reflected some degree of reflexivity, what was interesting to note were the ways they critiqued themselves and the nuanced analyses in which they engaged. Because we left the assignment open in terms of what they could choose to critique and *how* they would talk about their topics, we felt that their responses were authentic and less an academic performance for us, the instructors. In addition, we noted their explorations existed along a spectrum from those who admitted to never having considered such issues to those that felt they were social justice minded but broadened

that perspective in the course, thus we did not relegate them into one category from which to speak. For those narratives that began with qualifiers about how students felt they were aware of and open to diversity before the course began, these students dug deeper, excavating their own privilege or recognizing social injustices even when to discerning eyes it may have appeared they ‘had it’ already. These stories were powerful and provide promise in continuing such work in the teacher education classroom.

The students who reported having been influenced then, including those who were just beginning or those who were further along in the quest for social justice, affirmed the potential of the assignment by illustrating how it had allowed for growth from their starting points. Many of their statements illustrated the kinds of movements we wanted to foster because they showed the potential to ‘see’ otherwise, to imagine differently and more justly. As teacher educators, the project gave us an opportunity to see which of our learning tasks and readings our students felt affected those movements most.

Through our analysis, several relevant themes came to light. We turn now to a description of each of those major themes in students’ responses: changed perspectives on social justice topics, discerning an artifact anew, and recognition of privilege. We then illustrate how not all of our students accepted our prompt and demonstrate how some instead expressed resistance in varied ways. Finally, although we find the assignment incredibly value for a number of reasons we illuminate, we take a moment to issue some cautions in the work and recognize its limitations. We conclude with implications of the assignment for teacher education classrooms.

Trends in Self-Critique

Changed Perspective on a Social Justice Topic

Many of our students began their responses by detailing how their perspectives on a certain topic related to social justice had changed. This was often related to a broad concept they had once treated as axiomatic, but, through readings and discussion in the course, they newly discerned as a difference that was socially constructed. There were multiple ways that students transformed. Some tended to focus on particular elements or forms of difference, while others related more directly to new ways of understanding teacher practice.

Seeing gender, sexuality, and race. Several students' responses focused on their new perspectives on gender. While we had encouraged them to both question the ways that males and females were treated in schools, we also engaged students in work to purposefully disrupt the strict gender binaries upheld in our society (Boyd, 2014). In their final autobiographies, they described how they had begun to see that gender was not a natural entity. One student, Tara, a white female, stated, "Before engaging in the material of this course, I had never thought about how children were forced into certain roles from birth; I always just believed that boys and girls had different interests." Deconstructing what she had 'always believed' to be true led Tara to then apply this to future thinking for her classroom, about which she shared, "In my own classroom, I hope to create a more 'gender neutral' environment. I recognize the fact that students will enter my door with preconceived notions about gender identity already influencing their way of thinking." Not only did she recognize a broad social justice issue, but she also brought it to the more local, immediate context of her future classroom. Similarly, Jonathan, a black male student, shared his newly formed perspective on sexuality and his plans to create a more inclusive classroom. Because he was born in what he labeled a

conservative Christian community, he disclosed, “Sexuality was something that was never discussed when I was growing up,” and continued with the critique, “The way we normalize heterosexuality when we ask a young man ‘Do you have a girlfriend?’ or when we tell a young woman she should ‘marry the man of her dreams’ sends the message that heteronormativity is our expectation.” Rather, he planned for a classroom that promoted free expression of sexuality and gender.

Still, other students shared their altered viewpoints in regard to race. Despite scholarship that disputes the notion of colorblindness (Thompson, 1998), a number of our students had held steadfastly to this social lens prior to our course. Some of the most powerful student narratives catalogued experiences in which they truly assumed they had not ‘seen’ race. An exemplar of this was Jenna’s story in which she described her first boyfriend who was African American. She wrote, “I am white. We were just kids. In my initial autobiography, I described how I learned to see the world ‘color-blindly’ through these friendships.” After returning to her autobiography, however, Jenna, later wrote, “Now, as this class comes to a close, I am able to critique this earlier version of my own self. What I didn’t realize initially is that there is no such thing as being ‘color blind.’” She described instead a recognition of difference, avowing, “There are differences in life experiences and outlooks between the races, whether we see, acknowledge, or even want them or not.” She was thus able to articulate how notions of colorblindness are ideologically constructed to ignore the existence of race and racism.

Beyond these, a number of other students described additional experiences of ‘seeing’ inequity. These candidates recognized that inequity existed outside of traditionally represented binaries of, for example, black and white. In one illustrative

example, a white male student had initially used test scores in his first submission to illustrate his awareness of discrepant school access. He later critiqued himself for upholding a racial dichotomy with two sides, asserting, “I failed to acknowledge how this inequity affected the other minoritized groups in this classroom besides just African Americans, such as Hispanics, Native Americans, and those of Middle Eastern descent.” He went on to acknowledge, “I lacked the depth necessary to think critically about racial issues” stating that there are in fact “multiple dimensions of racial inequities.” The autobiography assignment allowed him a platform to wrestle with his views of race. Another white student, Lexie, similarly conveyed her feelings about her own original limitations in thinking, disclosing, “I came to realize that by generalizing the types of injustices that existed to one category I was not the social justice advocate that I thought I was. I wanted to achieve equality for all students, not realizing that treating all students the same was injustice in itself.” Like her classmate, Lexie here comprehends how ignoring differences in order to promote equality is a fallacy. Thus, our students were able to identify their good intentions and evaluate them in this repeated autobiographical assignment.

Seeing institutionalized practice. In addition to changed perspectives on gender, sexuality, and race, our students took on alternative views of pedagogical practices they had witnessed in current contexts, as many were jointly in a school placement observing at the time of our course. Still others referenced their own past school contexts in terms of accepted practices. Many of these they had established as customary based on what Lortie (1975) documented as the “apprenticeship of observation”. This referenced how easily pre-service candidates often categorize teachers’ practices as given. One of our

students, Brooke, also a white female, delved deeply into thinking about teachers' practices and how we label them. She wrote of a teacher at her placement school, who she admired for her "impressive control over her class." Yet, after our consideration in class, she documented that she began to question the teacher's exercises, reflecting, "such rigidity teaches students that getting the right answer is more important than actually thinking" and that it might "miss the opportunity to teach kids things that really matter." Thus, Brooke came to new perspectives on an aspect that is often at the forefront of pre-service teachers' minds: classroom management.

Similarly, Shaun, another white student, reported on a school in which he had been present during the semester. He described having observed how teachers spent more time with and devoted their attention to students who were privileged. He analyzed this observation, offering, "One of the problems with perpetuating privilege is that it often widens the gap of ability between the highest and lowest. The students who are advanced are going to continue to be that way while the students with lower abilities will continue with that path as well." He elucidates how the reproduction of privilege occurs in the microcosm of the classroom.

From a related perspective other students critiqued institutionalized practice but on a grander scale than teachers' pedagogical practice. Rachel, a female student of color, questioned the stratification of students at the high school she attended. She described a separate program for gifted students of which she was a part, a distinction that actually led her to another physical campus for classes and activities. She noted "Multiple social injustices were present in the program that I am now able to reflect on but before I did not notice." Also on a more macro-level of critique, Tonya, a white student, took note of our

instructional efforts to debunk the notion of the ‘teacher savior’ (Ayers, 1994) and our attempts to prompt our students to think about collectivity and the power of collaboration in schools. Throughout the course, we advised students to seek like-minded allies in their schools who would also work toward social justice. Mirroring this in her comments, Tonya began, “I didn’t understand at the beginning of the semester is that education truly is a team effort . . . I . . . assumed that it was solely the responsibility of the teacher to develop curriculum and assessments for their students, and that interaction with other teachers, administrators, or parents, would stifle an educator’s autonomy.” To combat the traditionally isolating nature of schools and notions that teachers must work alone toward progress, we encouraged students to be active and critical colleagues. Tonya thus continued, “I’ve learned through this class though, that education is a team effort.”

While not related to a specific pedagogy, Michelle and Tonya’s transformed perspective on broader educational occurrences are crucial and illustrate how our students took on new perspectives regarding institutionalized elements that are often assumed as natural.

Discerning Artifacts Anew

A second theme in our analysis of student submissions was the students’ awareness of artifacts they had once taken for granted and later discerned with a more critical eye. These artifacts were generally pictures, symbols, or other tangible objects about which students had written passionately in the initial submission but that which, upon re-visit, they saw through a different lens. For instance, one white student, Olivia, wrote about how she reconsidered her high school mascot, “a stereotypical image of a Native American warrior” and the messages it conveyed. Although she had considered how a person of Native descent would feel about the artifact, she told us she had done

this “without considering my own or anyone else's Whiteness. Now as I am more aware of my own race and its implications for privilege, the invisibility of it dissipates.”

Another white student, Zack, originally wrote about the impact that the acclaimed novel *The Catcher and the Rye* had on his own life. In re-visiting his artifact, however, he also highlighted the existence of whiteness. He disclosed: “As much as I love the book and appreciate the quality of literature . . . it does have a limited audience considering that it is written from the point of view of a white, privileged teenage male.” Both students took an entity of which that they had an initial, distant, reading and made it more personal, seeing how their own social lenses shaped these perspectives.

Not only did students read social artifacts and objects anew, they also read elements from their own collections through an alternative framework. For example, Tyler, a white student, re-read the image of her high school show choir, a picture she included initially for different reasons, from a multitude of critical perspectives. First, she recognized “a striking feature of the choir is that it is heavily White,” despite the fact that there was a large population of Indian students in her school. Beginning with race, she then moved onto consider LGBTQ issues presented by the image, where she cataloged her memories of a three part mantra of the group that ended with “we’re not gay!” despite the fact that many students in the group actually identified openly as lesbian or gay. Although she offered no resolution to this conundrum in her writing, Tyler nonetheless pointed out that she did not consider any of this in her first discussion of the artifact. She continued beyond race and heteronormativity to explore further issues of gender, stating, “My previous presentation made explicit mention of the ability to ‘field an equal number of girls and boys . . . it turns out that during some sections, the boys and

girls need dance partners,” and thus she critiqued what had initially seemed a social justice agenda for instead upholding normative gender patterns. She finished, “it’s still too much of a shock to our modern sensibilities to have two girls dancing together,” critiquing her own reading as well as the broader social standards that governed her experience. The heightened perceptivity with regard to race, sexuality, and gender with which Tyler re-assessed her image was noteworthy. Her analysis helped us more fully discern the potential of the autobiography assignment. Students did come to an awakening but did not essentialize themselves as ‘enlightened’. Rather, like Olivia, Zack and Tyler, they understood the moments they had upheld the power structure that benefited them.

As Emily, another white female student, put it, “When the course began, I knew that there were social inequalities and inequities that are reproduced in our schools, but I did not see my place within these structures in a critical light – I was an observer of these injustices, rather than seeing myself as an unwitting participant in their replication and a potential change agent to work against them.” She went on to describe her observations in a local high school and her changed perspective on not only the students in them, but also the lack of support structures offered in the school. Critiquing her original, savior mentality in her first artifact involving the school, she wrote: “To choose this artifact implies some kind of separation and immunity from the inequities revealed in it – that I am not part of their replication in school contexts – and that, instead, I am there to ‘fix’ it as a magical outer force, with the inherent wisdom of my sex and race.” Hers, like others, was marked by a discourse in which she connected *herself* in a powerful way to social reproduction. Seeing entities in this way, as not only external to the self, but as

something in which she also resided, illustrates the potentially personal element and reflexivity in the assignment.

Recognition of Privilege

Realizations of privilege. Most outstanding in all of the students' narratives was the theme of the recognition of privilege. Many of our white students, perhaps not surprisingly, admitted in their narratives to never having known they had privilege. Scholars have well-documented this aspect of whiteness (Lipsitz, 2010), and this was reflected in our student's statements such as, "I was completely oblivious to the unearned privilege I received for being a part of the dominant race, and I had never before stopped to think about who was being oppressed at the expense of my privilege." Their critiques were often personalized and authentic, lacking much of the language that permeated their first autobiography. Instead, their discourse was punctuated by an awareness that their privilege came at the cost of someone else's, an often difficult subject to broach with budding and idealistic teacher candidates. Some identified the rampant myths of meritocracy in their original artifacts; some addressed how the extracurricular programs they had attended now emanated financial capital; some examined their school experiences in more depth and centered on issues of power and oppression; and finally others delved into the privileges afforded by their family and social networks. In all of these sub categories, students openly discussed the unearned benefits that had accompanied their experiences or arose from the people they had included in their original assignments.

Privilege and meritocracy. The myth of meritocracy is a pervasive and persistent social script in our society (Barry, 2005), and our students had not been

excluded from the tentacles of this creature. They generally believed that their hard work had landed them in college and in our classroom, and they had been taught to believe in the value of hard work and individualism as the key to success. After our course readings, however, our students shared different perspectives on meritocracy than they had in their original submissions. Overwhelmingly, they cited our reading of Tim Wise's *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (2011) as the impetus for their self-critique. This was exceptionally relevant in the narrative of one white student, Sarah, who reported that her parents were "self-made" and who was funding her own education. She shared, "No one has ever given me anything, I thought." Referring to Wise's reading, she avowed, "This reading made me consider things that I had never previously considered, like the fact that my inherited race had informed the privileges my family received for generations and generations." Reflecting a similar journey, Angie, another white student, connected the notion of meritocracy directly to her upbringing. Where she had once lauded her parents for instilling in her a strong work ethic, she reconsidered how this made her believe blindly in meritocracy. She wrote, "It is naïve to think that the same effort put forth by a person of color and a white individual or members of high and low social classes will have the same effect, because the unfortunate reality is that the structure of society makes it much easier for the white person and the person of high social class to succeed." Thus, the autobiographical assignment afforded students a space to explore their family background and the ways the benefits their lineage bestowed capital upon them.

This focus on meritocracy inevitably arose as well in students' narratives about the privileges they acquired in their schooling experiences. Harper, a white female

student, originally included her diploma from her International Baccalaureate program. This represented “the requirements, the dedication, the hard work, etc. that I felt it involved.” She went on, however, to re-consider, “I was born into a system of privilege that allowed me to succeed . . . Never did I stop to think that the reason I was afforded the opportunity to participate in the IB program and get my diploma was due in large part to my culture and my identity as a member of the white middle class and my family’s history.” Under the surface of her “hard work,” then, Harper saw the advantages she had been given at an early age.

Students’ references to schooling ranged from those regarding early childhood education, reflected in statements such as “I thought of preschool as simply another part of the education process, and never dwelled much on the fact that preschool benefits privileged individuals,” to resources in students’ schools, such as “The teachers did not have to worry about lacking the proper resources to teach their students,” to the reproduction of whiteness in schools, such as “the vast majority of student and teachers at my school were all middle and upper-class white people.” Some of our students attended private schools, which they deconstructed as privileged spaces. Teachers for whom they were grateful in their first narratives became teachers who had the time to spend with them because of the privileges afforded by their educational setting. Grand narratives from schools, such as having been told, “social inequality was a thing of the past” became open for contradiction. Based on our reading of Beth Hatt’s (2007) “artifacts of smartness” (p. 151), students revealed that they had been constructed as smart throughout their whole lives in schools and began to evaluate how this, as one student wrote, maintained the “self-perpetuating cycle of privilege and ignorance.”

These accounts of school privileges ultimately extended into extracurricular activities as well. Reflecting Lareau's (2003) theory of *concerted cultivation*, wherein white, middle class children are in a sense groomed to attend college, many of our students participated in a number of activities that they later recognized as reflecting immense privilege. One white female student, Elise, re-visited her experience traveling abroad with members of her French class. She recounted that there were some students who did not join the trip, but she had not considered why that might have been the case. She then critiqued this omission, stating, "I mentioned that I was fortunate to have the financial resources to travel, I did not address the inequality that was present. As I look back on this experience, I can see how much I was benefitting from cumulative advantage. Elise here referenced Barry's (2005) notion of *cumulative disadvantage*, which we had highlighted in class and was a text that the students read. Her altered perspective required her to see an aspect that she had not before—how despite her excitement for traveling abroad, there was an underlying privilege to her actions. Many of our other students looked similarly at summer programs in which they had participated and carried a privileged undertone.

Nuanced understandings of privilege. The above theme of recognizing privilege for perhaps the first time, however, did not apply to all of our students. Some had considered their own advantages and structures of oppression prior to their participation in our class. Students whose responses appeared in this category were our students of color, students who had participated in some form of social activism, or students who had taken a course previously where they had begun to wrestle with similar topics. Those three were not mutually exclusive; for example, some students who had

taken a course were also activists. Their responses illustrated, however, how they continued to grapple with issues of power and social justice in their own lives and the ways that they gained more nuanced understandings of the manners in which these structures operate. What was powerful, then, was that our autobiography assignment afforded for growth from where a student began, which was not predetermined for them by us, the instructors. Rather, having the assignment as open, as a critique of the self, allowed our students to truly examine their own positions.

For instance, one female student of color, Samantha, initially struggled in class in regard to her possible privilege. She later wrote, “One thing that I have learned in particular through this class is that—even as a black woman—I have been the benefactor of privilege my entire life,” and then explained how the educational level and occupations of her parents had afforded her privilege. Our students, then, opened up spaces for recognizing varying aspects of privilege, thereby taking their knowledge of social justice issues to a more complicated awareness of the ways that power operates in various social contexts. Another student of color, Michelle, shared, “Looking back now I see so much privilege I once did not. . . All the while when this class first started I saw myself as unprivileged because I am a minority female from a lower middle class family.” Having engaged in her own self-exploration, she persisted, “This class has really caused me to put on my critical lenses and realize that white males are not the only group that has experienced privilege. I did not initially see how my attending nothing but academic and gifted schools put me higher than other minorities.” Like Samantha, Michelle primarily focused on her schooling experiences when considering the advantages she possessed. To be sure, these students were not assuming that they had privileges equal to those of

white students—only that they now had a more intricate awareness of how privilege worked in their lives and in others.

There was more to these nuanced understandings. Another student of color considered herself disposed to social justice at the beginning of the course. She had in fact participated in a social movement abroad to champion the rights of a faction in a nation whose basic justices were being denied. Even then, she began to see the implications of her privilege in her work, disclosing, “despite how I admitted that the minoritized group was oppressed, I had a limited view of oppression, one that saw this group as underprivileged . . . I never thought of referring to myself as overprivileged or overadvantaged.” Social justice for her had been something outside of herself, but our assignment prompted her to think about it more personally. This was reflected in her thoughts, “I always felt that my active participation in it [the social movement] was to elevate the status of the disenfranchised because they deserved basic human rights—but never had I considered how I have significantly more than most of them will ever have.” While this student reflects what most would consider activism with a social justice goal, her disposition did not preclude her from introspection and she here shared the acknowledgement of the benefits she maintained despite her actions to help others. That this assignment allowed for these varying degrees of reflection based on students’ current contexts and orientations continues to illustrate its value in a course geared toward social justice education.

Resistance to Critique

Despite the plethora of responses in which students reported altered perspectives and recognized privilege, not all of our students illustrated these patterns of critique and

heightened consciousness. Researchers have documented language of avoidance and politeness in the speech patterns of white females when it comes to issues of social justice and particularly race (for example, see McIntyre, 1997). These patterns were revealed as well in some of our students' narratives. Some resisted our invitation to re-think their initial responses and maintained narratives of individualized notions of success. Such students also continued to affirm the influence of sole figures in their lives without recognition of structural privileges. Further, some also wholly avoided the assignment by detailing experiences they had outside of the classroom rather than addressing how they had changed, or they maintained that they were already disposed toward equity in the beginning of class and thus did report any growth. Although less frequent than the reactions reviewed above, totaling approximately nine out of the 60 student responses, these nonetheless necessitate our continued thinking for how to reach all students with our coursework and assignments.

Despite the second autobiographical task asking specifically for reflection and personal critique, some students maintained the theme of meritocracy and used this to then express a belief in celebratory multiculturalism. This adherence to individualized success was seen in statements such as "I failed to mention the hard choices that I have always made and that I will continue to make for the rest of my life." Another student exemplified this theme in her statement, "I am incredibly proud of who I am and where I come from. . . I believe that every person should be proud of their history and their culture. . . It's ok to be different!" The student here, Natalie, a white female, implies that her experience and culture are equal to others. Everyone is equivalently different, and

thus everyone deserves to be appreciated alike. This perspective ignores the social stratification we discussed in class as well as power and structures of oppression.

Other students avoided the assignment by talking about education more generally. Lillian, a white student, wrote, “As a teacher, I will be in front of a class full of students that have no idea who I am, where I am from, or why they should respect me. It will be my job to make them respect me.” Her need to feel content as a teacher was not connected to any of the social justice topics we covered in class. Rather, she avoided self-analysis in regard to race, class, or gender by substituting it with her insecurities on teaching broadly. Another white male student minimally referenced social justice and finished his narrative with “In knowing what type of culture the classroom sets forth, we as educators are able to bring our own set of abilities and beliefs into the classroom.” Finally, another white student wrote on curriculum, avowing, “It is not socially just to leave anybody behind, and I also need to modify my material so that it benefits everyone equally.” While this may be true, the student spoke in general terms about education and did not re-visit an original artifact and engage in self-critique in the manner in which we asked. Without fulfilling this aspect of the assignment, the student avoided his own implication in privilege and oppression.

A few students maintained that they already knew about social justice and thus did not report any change in perspectives. What is notable here is that, as mentioned above, there were students who were equity-oriented at the start of the course who still found room for critique and development. The students who resisted by stating that they were already ‘there,’ were few. One white male student, John, who is representative of this category, relied on a former job he had that he felt had prepared him for our course.

He wrote of that experience, the “Position reflects the foundation of knowledge I came into class with. While [in the position], we had monthly social justice workshops, where we focused on different issues like universal design, racism, and person-first language.” Although he said the class “gave me a greater perspective of myself as a teacher and how I should navigate my students and myself through the obstacles of public education,” he avoids the task of analysis and introspection that we assigned. Instead, his response reads as though he already knew and maybe learned a little more, but lacks the depth we saw in others’ submissions.

Discussion: Maintaining Simple Solutions

Despite the few instances of resistance, the overwhelming majority of student responses were positive and generated the themes catalogued above. Our two iterations of the autobiography assignment not only provided students a space to tell their stories and recognize their own social lenses, but they also offered students a way to critique their narratives for the power and privilege at work in their own lives in whatever ways that they pertained to them. Students voiced the manners in which their families had influenced them or how their schooling had perpetuated social norms. Many of them referenced how whiteness as a system pervaded their lives, beginning to attribute their original ideas about meritocracy instead to structural advantage. They recognized the ways that schools are implicated in social reproduction, pointing out how pedagogical practices benefit some students over others. They re-read artifacts from the social milieu through new, critical angles and developed fresh perspectives on images and objects. It was this variety in responses and the students’ abilities to select issues for critique on

their own that helped us see they were actually working through and developing their stances as individuals.

Ellsworth (1989) reminds us that students' narratives:

Are partial—partial in the sense that they are unfinished, imperfect, limited; and partial in the sense that they project the interests of 'one side' over others.

Because those voices are partial and partisan, they must be made problematic, but not because they have broken the rules of thought of the ideal rational person . . .

Rather, they must be critiqued because they hold implications for other social movements and their struggles for self-definition. (p. 305-306)

We wanted our students to recognize the limits of their narratives, to see that their story was one in a host of others and one within a particular time and context. It is a story to be valued, but one that can also be critiqued. While we knew that the conclusions for each would be relatively unique, we hoped to open up that space and see the directions in which they moved. One reminder here is that our students attended a large, research university. Thus, this assignment was catered to our audience in that we knew by their sheer presence in our class most had been privileged in some way. The fact that they were able to articulate their privilege by the end of the course in such analytic terms, supported by course experiences and readings, points to the value of such an assignment.

We were buoyed by the evidence in students' narratives of the recognition of issues of social justice and the critique of privilege and structural oppression, and we thus maintain the worth of the assignment. One element that gave us pause, however, is that most of our students nonetheless reflected what Hytten and Warren (2003), in similar research with students, have labeled as "the discourse of 'fix it'," wherein "the belief is

that we understand cognitively the problems that exist; therefore, we should focus our time and energy on coming up with, and enacting, solutions” (p. 75). While they understood and analyzed themselves, our students then often offered quick, broad-sweeping solutions. While we did ask them to envision their future selves as social justice educators and thus wanted them to note things they would ‘do,’ many of their submissions continued to uphold a notion of obtaining results easily. In their simple solutions, students seemed to want to deny any continued complicity, and limited what was necessary to interpersonal civility. This furthermore relates to one of the inherent problematics of social justice (Ellsworth, 1989; Janks, 2015). Oftentimes our visions of justice rely in western, rational notions that have been constructed by the dominant culture. Working against those to find more just solutions requires diligent attention to thought and action.

The Potential of Two Stage Multi-Media Autobiographies

There are a variety of ways that pre-service teachers’ autobiographies can be called upon and explored in the teacher education classroom. Ours is one that adds to that body of options. Yet, we also hope to illustrate that in the two versions of the assignment, an initial response and a re-visit later in the course, students were able to more aptly critique their experiences and become critically self aware. As noted also, students grew from their individualized starting points—those who were new to the discourse of social justice became accustomed to the language and topics of critique, while those who were already engaged in the practice of analysis developed more nuanced understandings. It is the second stage of the assignment, the use of course materials applied directly and personally to humanize social justice and the open-ended

ways that students critically responded, that we posit here as a new approach that led to outcomes less prevalent in similar work by teacher educators. Furthermore, it is both the summoning of intellectual critique and the potential for growth that make this assignment a valuable one in the teacher education classroom and are the reasons that we find significance in its implementation.

Despite these benefits, student resistance to social justice content is well known and our analysis reveals this to be true here as well. Thankfully, only a small number expressed this in their re-write when they discursively hijacked the assignment to avoid self-critique. Further, both iterations had many cases of students striving for simple solutions to structural oppression. However, it is also evident that the revisiting of their autobiographies allowed the great majority of our students to identify how school and society were implicated in social inequities. It is crucial to note also that students were able to accomplish such tasks within the context of course readings and discussion, thus we want to be clear that this autobiographical work must be embedded in a course that provides sufficient material for students to draw upon. Through our intellectual work each week, students' knowledge of critical theory, injustice, and inequity grew, and we continuously asked them in class to apply these concepts to their personal and global worlds. Thus, we were able to scaffold the critique in the second autobiography.

We also recognize our own limits as white educators and the limits of the course we taught. Since our students perceived us as reflecting their own cultures, they were likely more apt to engage in self-critique and complete the assignment as intended. Researchers have documented "the overwhelming presence of whiteness" (Sleeter, 2001) in teacher education and scholars of color have noted the challenges of working within

such structures (Leonardo, 2014). Our existence as the course instructors therefore is an important factor to consider here. In addition, with 60 members in the course, it was difficult to truly accomplish the level of social interaction that makes for a rich learning experience and to develop the personal academic relationships we would have liked. The class also took place in an amphitheater-type room that limited conversation between teacher candidates. Furthermore, we could not assign activist projects and had to rely on placements from other classes to gather information and structure critique. These field experiences provided fodder for critique and were sure to have influenced students' perspectives in the second phase of the assignment. In addition, although we required students to interview teacher activists in hopes they would see the potential benefit in civic engagement, we were unable to actually involve them in any sort of social movement themselves. This is perhaps why the discourse of 'fix it,' as noted above, persisted. Therefore, while recognition is a first step, the social justice agenda must demand action. Our assignment, while worthwhile in cultivating self-analysis, did not promote our students to take any action. The next step, then, would be for students to assume responsibility for promoting social justice and perhaps document this process. Thus, while we are making strides, there is still more work to be done.

In future adaptations of this assignment, then, we would recommend that teacher educators consider those narratives of resistance we received from students and how one might go about addressing those preemptively in order to solicit critique from all students. In addition, to facilitate student action, students could be required to act on one of the elements in the second autobiography in which they describe who they want to be as a social justice educator. Perhaps part of the second autobiography then, is a critique

of an original artifact, an explanation of who they want to be, and a reflection on what they have done to get there. Taking steps toward those goals during their teacher education program would hopefully prompt students to continue once they enter their careers and further their growth as equity-oriented individuals. If our social justice agenda is to be realized, critique and action must be mutually present.

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