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Getting Explicit About Social Justice: Operationalizing an Elusive Construct in Neoliberal Times

Kathryn Strom, PhD
California State University, East Bay
Kathryn.strom2@csueastbay.edu
(510) 885.4145

Bradley Porfilio, PhD
California State University, East Bay
Bradley.porfilio@csueastbay.edu
(510) 885.4145

John Lupinacci, PhD
Washington State University
john.lupinacci@wsu.edu
(509) 335.6838

Headquartered at the University of Pittsburgh

Administrative Offices: 342 North Main Street ♦ Suite 301 ♦ West Hartford, CT 06117
860.586.7520 ♦ (f) 860.586.7550 ♦ www.cpedinitiative.org

Abstract

In a neoliberal era of rapidly expanding inequalities, preparing teachers and leaders to work for social justice in educational settings is more critical than ever. In this white paper, we argue that to more powerfully contribute to the preparation of socially just educators and leaders, programs should be able to clearly and explicitly articulate their distinctive understanding of “social justice” and trace the ways that this understanding is operationalized in particular facets of their program. To contextualize such an endeavor, we provide a brief overview of our contexts, our programmatic definitions of social justice, and the ways we put that definition to work in our courses, research methodologies, and program supports. We offer these as entry points into a larger conversation about operationalizing specific understandings of social justice in professional education doctorate programs, rather than as exemplars or models.

Keywords: *Social justice, neoliberalism, critical theory, doctoral education, professional doctorate*



Getting Explicit About Social Justice: Operationalizing an Elusive Construct in Neoliberal Times

Today's educational context is characterized by an increasingly neoliberal, "corporate" educational reform movement emphasizing accountability and privatization (Martusewicz, Edmundson & Lupinacci, 2015), a clamor for 'new knowledges' prompted by shifts from a manufacturing to a primarily knowledge economy (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2014), and massive demographic shifts that have changed the makeup of the US student population (Valdés & Castellón, 2011). These factors have created conditions that are expanding the historic, systemic inequalities that have been continually reproduced by systems of schooling (Bourdieu, 1973). In an era of increasing segregation, where more children than ever live in poverty, public schooling is being systemically underfunded, and whole cities are fighting to keep their schools open; preparing teachers and leaders to work for social justice in educational settings is more critical than ever.

We believe that Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED) has the potential to provide the space and connections to facilitate this charge. In June 2015, Katie, a professor from a mid-size public university in the western US, attended the action research CPED pre-convening workshop at California State University, Fullerton. When discussions turned to social justice—which undergirds at least some forms of action research (e.g., Anderson, & Herr, & Nihlen, 2007), the question arose- what does one *mean* when they reference social justice? What does CPED mean when it says social justice? As a new faculty member with California State University, East Bay's (CSUEB) Educational Leadership for Social Justice (ESLJ) professional doctorate program, Katie brought the question to her colleague, Bradley, asking: What do *we* as a program mean by social justice? This sparked a dialogue that resulted in our submitting a working session to CPED for the 2015 Boca Raton convening. Our programmatic interrogation resonated with the session participants, who engaged in conversations regarding their own institutional understanding of social justice and sharing the ways they are operationalizing, or attempting to operationalize, that understanding throughout their programs. At a reprisal of the convening presentation, we met colleagues from Washington State University (WSU), another public university in the Pacific Northwest, who bring a similar critical orientation to their work, and entered into a collaboration.

In this white paper, we argue that to more powerfully contribute to the preparation of socially just educators and leaders, member institutions of CPED must be specific about the ways their programs respond to CPED's first framing principle- that is, the ways their programs are "framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice" (CPED, 2016). More specifically, we argue that programs should be able to clearly and explicitly articulate their distinctive understanding of "social justice" and trace the ways that this understanding is operationalized in particular facets of their program. To contextualize such an endeavor, we turned a lens on our own programs to interrogate the ways we carry out this important framing principle. In the following sections, we offer a brief overview of our contexts, our programmatic definitions of social justice, and the ways we put that definition to work in our courses, research methodologies, and program supports. Importantly, we offer the following as work-in-progress examples to serve as entry points into a larger



conversation about operationalizing specific understandings of social justice in professional education doctorate programs, rather than as exemplars or models.

Getting Explicit About Social Justice: Defining an Elusive Construct

The term “social justice” is both a term that is used to connote many different meanings as well as a phrase with political consequences. Indeed, merely using the phrase “Social Justice” institutionally is a political act—and researchers suggest the term is also fairly new to fields like educational leadership (Shields, 2015). It is no wonder, then, that this construct is often used vaguely or left undefined by educational doctoral programs. We argue, however, that programs must be deliberate and specific about their definition of this broad terminology, as well as the literatures that inform their understanding of it. Otherwise, it is very easy for this term to become a mere buzzword that does not actually serve a purpose programmatically.

CSUEB’S Educational Leadership for Social Justice (ELSJ) doctoral program takes an explicitly critical understanding of social justice, maintaining that education for social justice means interrupting systems and structures that perpetuate and expand oppressions in our society, particularly for historically marginalized populations of students. The programmatic understanding of social justice is informed by several intellectual fields dedicated to understanding what is responsible for oppression, power differentials, and inequalities in schools and society. Some of the sub-disciplines informing the program include critical multicultural education, transformative leadership, critical theories, and critical pedagog(ies). Moreover, faculty are also committed to guiding students to think about what practices, policies, pedagogies, and structures have the potential to eliminate oppression and to have a social world where human joy, love, and freedom flourish (Freire, 1993). Finally, we have also incorporated the notion of “practitioner-scholar” into our understanding of doctoral preparation for social justice. This concept has been fruitful for us as we trouble the traditional academia/practice divide and dominant notions of knowledge and knowledge creation in our mission to prepare leaders who are simultaneously critical theoretical thinkers, rigorous and reflexive researchers, and on-the-ground practitioners committed to interrupting educational systems of oppression.

WSU’s program focuses dually on issues of social justice and sustainability, and its understanding of social justice is informed by diverse array of theoretical traditions. Within the program there is a group of critical faculty that draw from the field of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993,1998; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2006) and ecocritical pedagogical frameworks (Bowers, 1993, 2001; Gruenewald, 2003; Kahn, 2010; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2015). The College of Education’s conceptual framework expresses as one of its core values a commitment to diversity and importance of interrupting the status quo systems of privilege and power. A critical contingency of faculty in the program strives to recognize that 21st century challenges of social justice and sustainability require a strong commitment to understanding and interrupting the complex relationships that constitute, and are constituted by, dominant discourses and discursive practices of Modernity in schools and society. Furthermore, it is essential that such interruptions are intricately and intimately intertwined with our own work in relationship to the tasks we ask of our students and future students. An ecocritical



approach in a program committed to the role of educational leaders committed to social justice and sustainability in education addresses how education is shaped by systems of exploitation, violence, and a refusal to understand and embrace mutuality and interdependence (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2015). In order to respond to the violence perpetuated by our current social, economic, and environmental contexts, ecocritical educators have the responsibility to examine and address how schools create, support, and sustain the violence of social suffering and environmental degradation. When faced with such a challenge, ecocritical educators ask: How is it that exploitation, and the associated unjust social suffering and environmental degradation, is rationalized, justified, and/or ignored? In an attempt to address these questions, this growing critical contingency takes the position that we, as scholar-activist educators, must put to work an ecocritical approach to inequities for all in education.

Operationalizing Social Justice Programmatically

Articulating a clear definition of social justice in education is only a beginning. The important work lies in putting that definition to work through different program facets. For example, in relationship to its understanding of social justice, the program at WSU has objectives that students carry out through a combination of coursework and field experience in connection with inquiry practices of a variety of research methods that often culminate to action research. Expressing the goal of the program in the handbook, the program committee states: “The ultimate goal is to prepare educational leaders who work together toward the goals of educational and institutional improvement and social justice” (Educational Leadership Program Committee, 2015, p. 9). Further, in the breakdown of outcomes, two of the five outcomes explicitly express a commitment to social justice. These include a) Identifying and analyzing the theories, research, and policies, related to the study of K-12 educational/teacher leadership: ethics and social justice; inquiry; policy; and leadership development; and b) Articulating core values and modeling the guiding principles of the profession including: commitment to social justice; understanding of ethical responsibilities of leadership; effective and respectful interaction with others of similar and diverse cultures, values, and perspectives; commitment to school improvement and a positive impact on student learning (Educational Leadership Program Committee, p. 9).

Furthermore, the WSU College of Education Conceptual Framework (2009) states:

The College of Education contributes to the theory and practice of the broad field of education, and dedicates itself to understanding and respecting learners in diverse cultural contexts. We facilitate engaged learning and ethical leadership in schools and clinical settings. We seek collaboration with diverse constituencies, recognizing our local and global responsibilities to communities, environments, and future generations (p. 4).

Visually represented on the walls of the classrooms and in every syllabi and program handbook is a shortened version of the statement: “Collaboration with diverse communities of *learners* in cultural context, engaged *learning* with meaning and purpose, and ethical *leadership* toward a sustainable and just future.” This statement organizes the three concepts of learners, learning, and leadership in a Venn diagram, and also serves as



a powerful tool for connecting students and teachers with the college's commitment to developing scholarly practitioners through signature pedagogy, inquiry as practice, and problems of practice.

These guiding frameworks play a large role in holding us, as ethical leaders in education, accountable to social justice and sustainability. Seeing social justice and sustainability as complex, but interconnected challenges for both current and future generations, we engage through coursework and the designing and conducting of collaborative research in a self-reflexive ecocritical pedagogical process. This process is framed primarily by engaging in the process of recognizing the relationship between language, culture, knowledge, and power specifically in relationship to any set of diverse problems of practice. In our conceptualization of this particular graduate program at WSU, we differentiate it from more traditional approaches to educational doctoral coursework that tends to separate teachers from administrators. Our EdD program, by design, envisions the classrooms as collaborative spaces where local, national, and international problems of practice are not only identified and examined, but also proposed solutions are discussed across traditional professional barriers. Our program fosters a space to develop a very different kind of educational leader, leaders that took social justice and sustainability very seriously and that were focused on all levels of public education supporting such initiatives.

The program is designed for students across the state and region to attend year-round courses delivered through a variety of means that primarily consist of in person on-campus meetings, video conferencing system, and online coursework for students in remote locations. Additionally, each cohort of students—which are comprised of an intentional selection of students focused on teacher leadership or educational leadership with diverse backgrounds and professional positions in the state and region—attend a two-week Summer Leadership Institute for two consecutive summers. The program committee explains in the program handbook (2015):

“The purpose of the leadership institutes is to build a learning community and support network among the statewide cohort, and to form inquiry groups that will focus dissertation research on common problems of leadership in educational settings” (p. 6).

Over the course of the four-year program, students take courses in Leadership, Research, and Foundations together. They then fill out their programs with specialized electives and continue on to preliminary exams and the dissertation. A typical program of study for students consists of 15 credits in Leadership courses, which consist of the five of the following three credit courses: Leadership Studies, Policy Formation & Analysis in Education, School Organization (or School Administration), Curriculum Theory, Intro to College Student Development (to be replaced by Introduction to Adult Learning and Professional Development). They take five of the following three credit courses for Research: Action Research, Educational Statistics, Principles of Research, Qualitative Research, Doctoral Dissertation Preparation. If students elect to conduct a traditional quantitative dissertation, they are required to take a Quantitative Research course that moved beyond the introductory course content they receive in Educational Statistics. Students are also required to take nine credits of Foundations three credit courses: Values & Ethics, Race & Identity, and History & Philosophy of Education.



In theory, the college's conceptual framework and CPED's definition of the educational doctorate are considered as influential to all of the courses, and if not in each course, then at a multitude of points through a student's program. One illustration is found in our course on Adult Learning and Professional Development. Following a critical and ethical autoethnography assignment where students reflect on their roles in their workplace and their own professional learning as adult learners, the students are required to do a critical needs assessment of their schools or community organization. As part of learning to generate professional development strategies and plans for addressing current problems of practice in educational or other organizational settings, the students work collaboratively with one another, members of their community, and with their instructors to identify needs and critically examine the root causes of those needs. The final project is a professional development plan that meets the needs of a diverse array of adult learners and directly addresses a need connected to social justice and sustainability and emerges from working closely to include listening to and partnering with their broader school and surrounding community.

The program faculty in the committee's current configuration and leadership is at the moment working to curriculum map the courses with a specific emphasis on the role each course not only plays in the scope and sequence of the program but also toward the development of scholar-practitioners committed to social justice and sustainability. The hope is that through this process emerging from a self and group examination of understanding of the program's objectives in relationship to CPED and the college's conceptual framework, there will be a clearer understanding of a signature pedagogy and inquiry process anchored in addressing problems of practice toward supporting social justice and sustainability. At the current moment, this work is in process and leaning toward Action Research models that involve community engagement and methods drawing heavily from Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) influencing both the pedagogy in the courses taught and the connected inquiry projects and research dissertations.

At CSUEB, critical understandings of social justice run throughout our ESLJ program coursework as well. For example, early in the doctoral program, students take Purposes of Leadership, where they learn various theories related to leadership and are required to outline specifically how aspects of transformative leadership can inform their practices in schools. They also take Leadership for Equity I, where they learn why difference in schools and society is linked to oppression and inequalities, and build their understanding of characteristics of socially just schools and societies. Building on this knowledge, they continue to Leadership for Equity II, where students have the opportunity to examine insights from various critical theories in order to better understand pressing problems facing schools, youth, and society.

In these courses, we offer active opportunities to engage with and enact critically-oriented ideas of social justice. For example, in Leadership for Equity I, a key idea is that to become leaders who are equipped to eliminate oppression and social justice in schools and society, individuals must first begin to locate themselves as social beings--they must know where they come from, know why they believe what they believe, and be able to draw lines to the past that explain their present day views. To do so, we assign students to develop critical stories of themselves, or critical autoethnographies, in which they reflect on how their race, class, gender, sexuality, class status, political identity, and so on has



affected them as students, educators and community members. As a final product, students create a digital story that communicates specific conversations, experiences, and memories, instances, events and interactions that have shaped their identities and worldviews. They then engage with each other's digital stories. This assignment provides the opportunity to analyze how systems of power have impacted their lives and their cohort members, as well as raises their awareness of ways power imbalances, injustice, inequalities and oppression dominate social life in schools and in the wider society.

We also argue that understandings of social justice must be aligned with the research methodologies that are taught in doctoral programs. In CSUEB's ELSJ program, the majority of our students are people of color; thus, we take as a starting point the understanding that, as practitioners of color, our students' voices have been doubly marginalized in the educational research literature. Accordingly, we emphasize the personal as political, encouraging students to explore methodologies such as self-study and autoethnography, and encouraging writing from a first-person perspective. In research classes, we problematize 'traditional' methods for seeking of a single truth at the expense of others, and the way the "distant researcher" myth of objectivity has allowed the (usually white male) researcher to interpret the story of the "other" without claiming responsibility for that interpretation. We also highlight participatory approaches and critical, feminist, queer, and indigenous methodological perspectives.

Finally, we propose that a doctoral program's understanding of social justice must also be carried through to the supports that are offered its "non-traditional" doctoral students—such as students of color, first generation college graduates, high-poverty students, and English language learners (categories that, of course, overlap). One prominent example concerns that of writing supports. Across doctoral programs, the issue of academic writing tends to surface—yet academic writing is not normally included as an explicit part of the doctoral curriculum. Students are expected to arrive with advanced academic literacy skills, and those that have not had prior access to learning this privileged, elite form of language are at a major disadvantage. As such, writing at the doctoral level becomes a social justice issue. At CSUEB, we adopt a sociocultural view of student development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) rather than expecting them to come in with particular skills, we assume they need to be *apprenticed* into academic writing at the doctoral level. We then embed direct teaching and practice of academic language in coursework, taking a systemic functional linguistics (SFL) view of teaching writing (Halliday, 1993) that focuses on academic writing as *genre* (Derewianka, 2012), and explicitly teaching patterns of language commonly used in the genre (while still problematizing the language of power in academia).

For example, one of the most common skills students struggle with in academic writing is their use of direct quotations from other authors. Using an SFL approach, Katie designed a workshop that scaffolds student understanding of the purposes of using quotes in doctoral-level writing and the patterns of language students can use to appropriately discuss the quotes. In the workshop, Katie first facilitates a conversation about the notion of whose voice should be heard in doctoral level writing, helping students to talk through some of the anxieties associated with presenting one's own ideas and drawing on the literature to support them (rather than over-relying on the words of other scholars to carry the paper). They then delve into the multiple purposes of direct quotes, examining examples from articles with which they are familiar. As a next step, the class works in

pairs to analyze the linguistic choices the authors of these examples made to use the quote to demonstrate their point, commenting on the way the quote was introduced and explained by the author, and connected to the point s/he was making. After co-constructing understanding through these multiple examples, students then are invited to find a quote they have used in a recent paper and conduct a metalinguistic analysis of the way they used the quote, reflecting on the following questions: what is the purpose of the quote? How is the quote introduced? How is the significance of the quote indicated to the reader? How is the quote connected to the larger point of the paragraph/section?

Challenges and Moving Forward

As we noted earlier, both programs are works in progress. At CSUEB, we negotiate multiple tensions in our efforts to be explicit about our social justice mission and enact it in all facets of our program consistently. One major issue is that, while we are clear about our programmatic vision of social justice, individual faculty members hold a spectrum of beliefs on what the term “social justice” means and how it should be enacted in faculty practice. For example, while the CSUEB doctoral program takes an explicitly critical stance that recognizes the urgent need for equity work for historically marginalized populations, a few faculty members tend to take a more equality-oriented stance, or the view that “*All* students deserve a quality education.” Moreover, since some of our full-time and part-time were never exposed to connecting leadership, research, teaching, and learning to eliminating power balances, discrimination and injustices in schools and society, we have begun to engage in conversations as to why educators leaders need to engage inquiry to understand and dismantle oppression as well as to attend to social justice and academic achievement in the educational settings (Shields, 2015). We have also encouraged the same faculty to attend educational conferences and CPED’s convenings so as to join us in the larger conversation about operationalizing specific understandings of social justice in professional education doctorate programs.

We also have worked within the system to seize opportunities to change our program. Recently, CSUEB has begun the process of converting its quarters to semesters, and the ELSJ program took this opportunity to examine its course sequencing and content to align it even more closely with its goals of interrupting entrenched oppressions in schools and society. This allowed us not only to refine our current course offerings, but also strategically create a course to address a gap in coursework addressing critical work with communities. Thus, beginning in 2018, we will be offering Community Outreach, Advocacy, and Organizing, a course designed for students in leadership roles to examine the role of community organizing and action for fostering school change and other issues of educational social justice. In this new course, students will study efforts to engage in collaboration with a range of community stakeholders and organizations, learn strategies for advocacy, outreach, and grassroots organizing within local communities, and will take part in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) or Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with a community organization.

We have also utilized the semester conversion process to create more supportive advising structures for our students. Previously, students received general advising from a faculty member designated as the EdD Coordinator, and were assigned an advisor who would serve as their dissertation chair only as they began their third year in the program



(the year they were expected to complete their dissertations). To provide our students with more intensive, long-term mentoring, we created the idea of “affinity groups” that will provide students with an advisor and small working group to offer support throughout their doctoral experience. However, because the faculty workload and student credit hours were configured with the start of the semester schedule, these groups will not begin until the 2018 academic year.

The program at WSU is currently faced with similar challenges as CSUEB. At WSU we have found that by working intentionally to build community and consistency in the faculty affiliated with the program’s teaching and advising needs the necessary teaming is in place for stronger collaboration toward a more cohesive program. While the program committee has begun to engage in structured curriculum mapping sessions that involved faculty discussing common scenarios that offer students the opportunity to collaboratively learn through addressing some common problems of practice in the State of Washington’s education system, the process is slow and spread out over the course of an entire academic school year into meetings scheduled that inevitably cannot accommodate all the faculty schedules. However, it is important to note that the sessions have brought faculty together to discuss how they address challenges of social justice and sustainability in their courses. Simultaneously, the efforts to curriculum map and request that instructors align their coursework and assignments to problems of practice that directly address and contribute to the development of ethical leaders working to support social justice and sustainability, have brought up tensions around some of the faculty feeling as though their “academic freedom” is being infringed upon. Moving forward, this raises an important question of what challenges are posed by different conceptions and understandings of important concepts like “social justice” and “sustainability” in relationship to proposing a common commitment through program standards and objectives. While differences among faculty is a strength, it certainly poses a challenge that requires time and relationship building for faculty to work through envisioning and assembling a cohesive and relevant scope and sequence of course content and research experience while staying aligned to the mission of the college and the CPED framework. Moving forward, these challenges combined with the ongoing pressures on and from students to move swiftly through programs require a very unique kind of ethical leadership. At WSU, we are co-learning with our students what that leadership looks like and how to re-envision leadership in relationship to the current socio-political and economic conditions impacting our lives and the lives of families and children in our schools and community.

Finally, we also have initiated efforts within CPED itself to bring a focus to the issues we have raised in this paper. We have created a CPED Improvement Group (CIG) entitled “Ed.D Programs for Social Justice,” and have proposed multiple projects aimed at helping member institutions define and operationalize their contextual understandings of social justice, sharing resources, and contributing scholarship to the relatively new area of social justice and EdD programs. To those ends, the CIG will begin with three initiatives. One will guide member institutions through conducting self-studies of their programs’ social justice understandings and the ways that impacts multiple program facets, with the goal of creating and sharing improvement action plans. A second project will include a collaboratively created wiki page hosted by CPED, on which we will curate resources for social-justice focused programs, such as relevant texts, syllabi, and



activities. A regional study is also planned to analyze trends in socially just professional doctorate preparation, beginning with an analysis of EdD programs in California. Alongside these activities, and in collaboration with CPED leadership, we are planning a refereed journal special issue with both conceptual and empirical works examining issues of social justice in educational practitioner-focused doctoral programs.

In closing, we acknowledge that using the term “social justice” in explicit ways and articulating its operationalization programmatically is a political act that could result in reprisal at the faculty or institutional level. Recently, we spoke with directors of at two different institutions who were dealing with the tension of creating a social justice-focused program while not being allowed to use the actual terminology. Yet, we argue that CPED member institutions must gather the courage to actually use the term, explicitly define it, and connect it to program facets. Indeed, it is imperative, if we are to lead fundamental change in policy, practice, and research, to create schools and societies free from oppression, hate, and inequality.



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