A Case for Social Justice: An Integrative Approach to Incorporating Social Justice Education within the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating social justice education into teachers’ pedagogical practices is an essential and critical component for preparing 21st century students for a global society. In order for learners to be conscious of the injustices prevalent in our societies and in our world, we must find ways to engage students to grapple critically with social justice pedagogy. As educators, we play a major role in the socialization of our students and are, therefore, deeply responsible for aiding students in adopting principles and practices of equity, diversity, and social justice within their lives. As an initiative to teach for social justice, educators are encouraged to better prepare students for understanding and addressing issues pertaining to diversity and social justice, both locally within their communities, as well as worldwide. Through qualitative case study methods, this research inquires into the best practices for incorporating social justice education into teachers’ pedagogical practices by exploring four exemplary educators who teach for social justice.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................. 2
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... 3

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................. 6
  Introduction ........................................................................................................ 6
  Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................... 6
  Research Question .......................................................................................... 9
  Background of the Researcher ........................................................................ 9
  Overview .......................................................................................................... 12

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................. 13
  Introduction ...................................................................................................... 13
  What is Social Justice/Education? .................................................................... 13
  Why Does Social Justice Education Matter? .................................................... 19
  TDSB Social Justice Action Plan .................................................................... 20
  Conceptual Framework: Critical Pedagogy ....................................................... 23
  Multi-Pedagogies ............................................................................................. 27
  Summary .......................................................................................................... 30

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY ............................................................................. 31
  Introduction ...................................................................................................... 31
  Procedure ........................................................................................................ 31
  Participants ...................................................................................................... 32
  Data Analysis .................................................................................................. 33
  Ethical Review Procedures ............................................................................. 34
  Limitations ....................................................................................................... 35

Chapter 4: FINDINGS ....................................................................................... 37
  Introduction ...................................................................................................... 37
  Experiences That Informed Social Justice Understandings ......................... 40
  Interpreting and Conceptualizing Social Justice/Education .......................... 47
  The Role of the Instructor in Social Justice Teaching .................................... 52
  Implementing Social Justice Education into the Classroom ......................... 57
  Factors Influencing Social Justice Education ................................................. 66
  Challenges and Teacher Recommendations ................................................. 70
  Summary .......................................................................................................... 74

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION .................................................................................. 75
  Introduction ...................................................................................................... 75
  Relation to the Literature Resolution ............................................................. 75
  Implications ...................................................................................................... 84
  Recommendations .......................................................................................... 86
  Limitations and Next Steps ............................................................................ 87
  Reflecting on the Research Process ............................................................... 88
  Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 89
| REFERENCES | 90 |
| APPENDICES | 93 |
| Appendix A: Letter of Consent | 93 |
| Appendix B: Interview Questions | 95 |
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Nelson Mandela, the former president and freedom fighter from South Africa, once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Mandela, 2003). What did he mean by that? Based on my understandings, education is a fundamental element to achieving positive social change in our societies. Without a good education, there can be no social justice. As a racial minority who has experienced injustices including racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination, one of the sole reasons for choosing to become an educator is because I feel that there is no better place to create change than in the classroom. My philosophy of education is based on the principles and practices of equity, diversity, and social justice education. My attitudes and ideas are reflective of my overall commitment to social justice and change through education. Regardless of the strong emphasis placed on such pedagogy, many educators fail to incorporate social justice practices into their teaching. In my personal experience, the failure to discuss issues of diversity and justice has allowed the inequities that are widespread in our societal fabrics to subsist. As a result, the incorporation of social justice education into teachers’ pedagogical practices is a matter that commands the acknowledgment and devotion of educators who are endowed to provide students with an education that is grounded in diversity, equity, and justice.

Purpose of the Study

Social justice is a universally recognized concept that encourages individuals to recognize and combat inequality worldwide. As an initiative to teach for social justice, educators are encouraged to better prepare students to understand and address issues pertaining to diversity and social justice, both locally within their communities, as well as
A CASE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

worldwide. Developed as a strategy to meet the needs of the diverse student population, a major component of contemporary education reform within the Toronto District School Board as outlined in the Social Justice Action Plan (2010) is the call for the use of social justice education within the classroom. This type of education was developed as a pedagogy that uses principles based on equity, fairness, and respect as a means to prepare and assist students in gaining a sociocultural consciousness by providing them with pedagogical practices that discuss issues of diversity and collective differences in terms of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and establish students’ overall cultural understandings. According to Hunt:

[Teaching] for social justice is at the core of democratic education. It serves as a reminder not only of the inequities and biases that continue to wear away at the foundation of democratic values, but the powerful stories which inspire us to work toward change, to make the world a better place (Hunt, 1998, p. xxvii).

As educators, we must rethink our classrooms to make them environments that are dedicated to the promotion of diversity and social justice.

Why is social justice education significant in a country like Canada, where everyone is said to be treated equal? Section 15 of the Canadian Charter states that:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the rights to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability (The Constitution Act, 1982).
Canada, and Ontario in particular, is well known as being one of the most diverse and multicultural areas of the world (Clark & Wallace, 1996). With hundreds of diverse communities, Canada is a multicultural nation characterized by more than 200 different ethnic origins and over 100 languages, as reported in the Canadian census (Lam & Cipparrone, 2008). Diversity has proven to be significant in the shaping of the nation, as individuals continue to choose Canada as their new home due to its openness and its welcoming of newcomers. However, in spite of the democratic values that this nation is said to embrace, many people continue to face injustices on multiple levels in our society’s social structures. Race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality are examples of only some of the predictors of many of the injustices experienced in our communities, as well as worldwide. In this increasingly rough and diverged society, advocates of social justice believe that education focused around social justice issues can:

- Play a constructivist role in helping people develop a more sophisticated understanding of diversity and social group interaction, more critically evaluate oppressive social patterns and institutions, and work more democratically with diverse others to create just and inclusive practices and social structures (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, p. xvii).

The role of education in working towards social justice is substantial. There needs to a cognizant effort by educators to incorporate social justice education into their pedagogical practices, as integrating such teachings is a crucial aspect within classrooms that are committed to the promotion of equity, diversity, and justice. Through such pedagogy, teachers can work towards effecting positive change in their students by raising students’ awareness of the issues and inequalities that take place within our
societies and the world at large, and them encourage them in taking initiative to achieve as much fairness as we possibly can.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question of this study is as follows: In what ways do four urban Ontario educators incorporate social justice pedagogy into their educational practice?

The purpose of this research was to investigate how educators incorporate social justice education into their pedagogical practices, by exploring the best practices of four urban Ontario educators teaching in the Greater Toronto Area. Through this research, I hoped to find exemplary approaches to the teaching of social justice that can be applied to any urban classroom. I wanted to understand how teachers’ visions of social justice are connected to their teaching practices, and how effective social justice education is on the students’ learning. In addition, I intend on exploring strategies that may be recommended for new teachers who would like to incorporate social justice issues into their educational practice.

**Background of Researcher**

My decision to undertake this research study is deep-rooted in various reasons. Both my upbringing and my professional experiences have brought me to this research, and they have strongly influenced my passion for social justice education. Some important factors that influenced my parents’ choice to raise our family in Canada was because a) It is a multicultural country that values diversity, and b) because of the educational opportunities that are available and accessible to people in Canada. As a result of my experiences as an immigrant growing up in Toronto, I can relate to the
struggles and obstacles that immigrant, underprivileged, and racialized students face. Growing up in the Toronto school system as a black Muslim woman, I faced multiple dimensions of discrimination and disadvantages in my K–12 schooling. From being told to go back to my country by peers, to being advised to apply for college as opposed to university by guidance counselors, I often felt like I did not fit in with the school community. I regard my racial, gender, cultural, economic, and religious identification as being a part of a group that faces systemic inequalities within my society. I often felt different in the classroom and never felt represented or acknowledged in our teachings. Prior to my postsecondary experiences, these systemic inequalities were never something I explored, nor was I encouraged to investigate these issues by the educators around me. Consequently, I intended to focus my Master of Teaching Research Paper in the field of urban education to address issues of social justice. I aimed to research contemporary issues in education and schooling from a social justice and equity perspective by concentrating on the ways in which urban educators can incorporate social justice issues into their educational practices, as a way to engage students in their learning and to prepare them to become agents of change.

Unfortunately, social injustices such as race, class, gender, and sexuality play a major role within our society and, as a result, it affects all aspects of our lives. For myself, the experience of being a black student in a predominantly white school from junior kindergarten up until high school has led me to experience the ways in which injustices centered on race, class, and religion can operate in the daily lives of our students. By being placed in a specific category by school staff as a result of being a Somali Muslim refugee, I often felt there was a division. I remember on numerous
occasions being told that I should take certain courses or apply to specific post-secondary institutions because “it’s what people like [me] often did”. Those experiences greatly impacted me then, and they are my motivation for pursuing a career in education now. Part of my inspiration for studying and researching social justice education and the ways in which it can be used to model and promote equity and diversity education within the classroom is a result of the majority of my experiences in elementary and secondary school, which revolved around issues of race; importantly, topics centered on racism were often ignored. When topics or issues centered on racism occurred, staff, therefore normalizing such acts to happen consistently without repercussions, often overlooked them. The main reason why I believe teachers ignored such topics is because they were not equipped with the tools they needed to incorporate these practices into their teachings. In pursuing this research, I hope it has provided educators with awareness on how to use social justice teachings in their classroom, with the hopes of working towards a more diverse and equitable environment.

As a teacher candidate, I have come to realize that each of the injustices that I have experienced throughout my life was ultimately helping me to form who I am as a teacher today. As a result, I consider myself an educator who puts emphasis on pedagogy and practices that focus on social justice education. Doing this can be extremely difficult, and I struggle with learning how to do this to the best of my ability. To be a successful teacher, I believe that we must engage in effective and engaging pedagogical practices that most benefit our students and their learning. My passion in social justice education is what ultimately guides this Master of Teaching Research Paper. In an effort to learn about effective ways of teaching social justice, I have dedicated this study to examining
the ways in which current experienced urban Ontario educators are incorporating social justice issues into their educational practices, while addressing the implications this can then have on the students’ learning and, ultimately, their lives.

**Overview**

This research paper encompasses five main sections: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings/data analysis, and conclusion/limitations/implications. The introduction provides the context behind the motivation for directing the research on the ways in which urban Ontario educators are incorporating social justice issues into their educational practices. The literature review in Chapter Two presents the background information on the topic, as it provides the reader with a thorough review of the research that has already been conducted in the field of social justice education. The methodology section explains how the data will be collected and analyzed. Next, Chapter Four describes and analyses the findings from the data collected. Lastly, Chapter Five provides readers with the conclusion, a summary of the research questions and the data, the limitations of the study and, lastly, the implications of the study for supplementary research. References and appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

An extensive body of literature on social justice education has contributed to the educational development of diverse classrooms. The following literature review addresses the themes that are relevant to social justice education, including definitions of social justice, the significance of social justice pedagogy in the classroom, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)’s Social Justice Action Plan, critical pedagogy theory, as well as the multi-pedagogies practiced within social justice education.

What Is Social Justice/Education?

How do we define what we envision as social justice, and how can we approach it through the teaching of social justice in the classroom? Based on the literature, the difficulties surrounding social justice often begin with the very meaning of the term. The concept of social justice is an objective that evades easy definition. There are many, and often conflicting, opinions about what social justice means and how one should go about promoting it both in society and in the classroom. As a result, the lack of a concrete definition plays a major role in why it is often difficult to teach tangibly within the classroom. Throughout the literature, it is a term that is considered definitionally complex, as people with differing philosophies and opinions interpret it in diverse and divergent ways. Jost and Kay (2010), write that social justice is a concept that originates in philosophical discourse and it is often stated without being clearly defined. Rizvi (1998) elaborates on that point by arguing the following fact:

[The] immediate difficulty one confronts when examining the idea of social justice is the fact that it does not have a single essential meaning- it
is embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and that are sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavors (p. 47).

Consequently, since a review of the literature makes evident a range of definitions of social justice education, it is important that several different understandings of social justice and social justice education are provided in this literature review to help support the diversity of educators within this research study.

**Defining Social Justice**

The term “social justice” was first used in 1840 by Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio, a Sicilian Priest, and it was later given exposure by Antonio Rosmini-Serbati in La Constitutione Civil Secondo la Giustiia Sociale in 1848 (Novak, 2000). Successively, in 1848, one of the most influential liberal thinkers of the 19th century, John Stuart Mill, offered an anthropomorphic approach to social justice, which gave the term an almost timely status for modern thinkers in his book *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government* (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). In the text, Mill argues the applicability of social justice by writing,

…we should treat all equally well … who have deserved equally well of us, and that society should treat all equally well who have deserved equally well of it, that is, who have deserved equally well absolutely. This is the highest abstract standard of social and distributive justice, towards which all institutions, and the efforts of all virtuous citizens, should be made in the utmost degree of converge (Mill, 1960, pp. 57-58).

However, at the end of the 19th century, Novak (2000) references that the term “social justice” began to be used by social reformers as a supplication for the ruling class to
focus on the needs of the displaced peasants who had become urban labors, or homeless. Nonetheless, current meanings of social justice “refer to an egalitarian society that is based on the principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights, and that recognizes the dignity of every human being” (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006, pp. 9-10). These authors believe that the current definitions and perspectives of social justice are often based on very particular views of what is right and what is wrong in our societies today.

In their book *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo (2012) describe social justice by providing both a contemporary common working definition of social justice, as well as a critical approach to social justice. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) point out that many people have a common understanding of social justice that is based around principles of fairness and equality. However, in order to expand upon such simplistic understandings of social justice, the authors provide their own definition of social justice that is rooted in a critical theoretical approach.

A critical approach to social justice refers to specific theoretical perspectives that recognize that society is stratified (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. xviii).

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) point out that in order for one to sincerely understand social
justice, they must recognize that “relations of unequal social power are constantly being enacted at both the micro (individual) and macro (structural) levels; understand our own positions within these relations of unequal power; think critically about knowledge” (p. xix). They indicate that if all of the above are enacted upon, the road to achieving a more socially just society will transpire.

**Defining Social Justice Education**

One of the main concepts that is essential to this research study is social justice within the context of education. A journal article published by Heather Hackman (2005) describes social justice education in connection with the goals of other education theories by stating that “social justice encourages students to take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments” (Hackman, 2005, p. 103). Her objective of social justice education includes student empowerment, the equitable distributions of resources, and social responsibility. She believes that these progressions must include democracy, a student-centered focus, dialogue, and an analysis of power. For Hackman (2005):

> [Social] justice education does not merely examine difference or diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality, and encourages students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural, and individual levels in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change (p. 104).

Similarly, Bell (2007) looks at social justice education as both a process and a goal. For her, “the goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs,” (Bell, 1997, p. 3) whereas, “the
A CASE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

process for attaining the goal of social justice... should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (Bell, 1997, p. 4).

Furthermore, social justice education allows educators and students to engage in dialogues that span differences, while promoting social diversity and justice in the educational setting. Social justice within the field of education is a type of education and a curriculum that honors students’ languages and cultures, that fosters the appreciation of differences, and that fosters a moral use of power that resists discrimination and inequity (American Educational Research Association, Leadership for Social Justice Special Interest Group. n.d.). Pedersen (1988) and Shor (1992) add to the literature on social justice education by suggesting that such pedagogy is mirrored in the development of knowledge and skills that surround one’s awareness of society, and of the power and inequalities within it. Education is an avenue for social change, and a classroom based on social justice education is a great opportunity to promote and model equity and diversity for students.

Within the literature on social justice education, Carlisle, Jackson, and George (2006) identify five key principles of social justice education in schools for the purpose of positively impacting teacher preparation, student achievement, and social justice practice in urban environments. They define social justice education as the “conscious and reflexive blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple social identity groups (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability), foster critical perspectives, and promote social action” (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006, p. 57). In order to enact their social justice education definition into practice, Carlisle, Jackson, and
George (2006) pinpoint five principles of social justice education that are essential for bringing social justice education to school communities. The intent of the principles is to “offer a model that is both broad enough to be reflective across multiple school settings and specific enough to be useful as a reflective and evaluative tool” (p. 57). These principles include: 1) Inclusion and Equity – promoting inclusion and equity by addressing all forms of oppression within the school setting, as well as within the community; 2) High Expectations – providing students with diverse and challenging learning environments that support students’ development, while holding all students to high expectations, and empowering students of all social identities; 3) Reciprocal Community Relationships – the school must realize its role as both a resource to and beneficiary of the community; 4) System-Wide Approach – the entire system (mission, resource allocation structures, policies, procedures, and physical environment) must demonstrate its pledge to creating and withstanding a socially just environment between and among various constituency groups, and in all areas of the system; and 5) Direct Social Justice Education and Intervention – all of the employees working within the school must be committed to this type of education, and they must be accepting of and willing to advocate for social justice, while confronting social oppressions (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006). Through a reflexive framework of schools and communities, and with the guidance and presidency of these five principles, Carlisle, Jackson, and George hope that educators can critically assess the fortes and flaws of their environments with respect to social justice, and that they work towards instilling these principles within their settings.
Why Does Social Justice Education Matter?

The point of this research study is to gain a deepened sense as to how people are calling upon the concept of social justice education in the classroom, while identifying the range of significances and visions they hold regarding this concept. In order to understand this, we must first analyze why this model of education is of importance to begin with. For Andrew Sturman (1997):

The importance that individuals attach to social justice is an intricate mixture of their moral and political views, their views about the capacity of education to tackle the disadvantages that students bring to school, their views of the support that parents of different backgrounds are able and willing to provide to their children and of the motivation of students (p. xi).

Social justice matters because it is not possible to separate the debate on issues of morality from the debate on education. Sturman says:

If the products of a state education system advantage a small proportion of the population over others, this must demand that the structures of education, its pedagogical practices, the content of its curriculum and the relationships of different groups to the curriculum be subject to scrutiny” (p. xii).

Bob Connell expands on this point:

An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage. … The issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is about (Sturman,
By recognizing the reality of the above statement, it is evident that social justice education is of great importance to the lives of students who are either considered privileged or disadvantaged. Paulo Freire writes that as educators, we must focus on creating equity and changing systems of oppression within schools and societies (Freire, 1970). Wang (2013) adds that through social justice education, we can “evoke the ideals of democracy, justice, human rights, equality, and equity” (p. 485). When we do this, we will disregard the commonness of only providing specific groups of students with this “advantageous education,” which Sturman argues in his book.

Education is a major asset that involves educators helping students to become more dubious towards commonly accepted axioms. By promoting social justice education, students are increasing their achievement and learning, whilst increasing their social and political consciousness. Based on the literature, social justice education helps student gain a sense of agency, as well as assisting them in developing a constructive social and cultural identity.

**TDSB Social Justice Action Plan**

Since this research will primarily focus on educators teaching within the city of Toronto, it is essential that we analyze and understand the Toronto District School Board’s Social Justice Action Plan, which has been put in place to assist and guide educators to address diversity, equity, and social justice within the classroom, the community, and globally.

**Social Justice Action Plan**

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest and most diverse school
board in Canada, prides itself on its commitment to the principles of fairness, equity, and human rights. As a strategy to enforce a board-wide social justice initiative, the Toronto District School Board (2010) implemented a mandatory social justice action plan that includes both a local and global justice component with the hopes of creating school-based social justice programming nationwide. The principal objective of the social justice action plan is to provide all schools within the board with the opportunity to learn about local and global issues, and to participate in actions that will potentially affect positive change (TDSB, 2010). According to the TDSB (2010):

The creation of a Social Justice Action Plan for our district will allow for a deepening of the work that has already begun on social justice issues and will coordinate and align similar work and learning opportunities already existing within the Board, providing a more strategic approach to contributing to a more socially just world and positioning the TDSB as a leader in this movement (p. 4).

The social justice action plan defines social justice as,

Social Justice is a specific habit of justice that is based on concepts of human rights, equity, fairness, and economic egalitarianism. Social justice requires inspiring, working with, and organizing others to collaboratively accomplish a goal consistent with these concepts. As such, it is an activity that requires a broader range of social skills than do acts of individual justice. These skills are considered fundamental to a civil society. Social justice is, in plain terms, the movement towards a more socially just world through the actions of a group of individuals working together to achieve
According to the document, “learning about and engaging in social justice issues (such as equity, diversity, abuse against women, poverty reduction, and environmentalism) will make school more relevant and meaningful for all students” (TDSB, 2010, p. 5). The Social Justice Action Plan outlines the key goals that the board members hope will contribute to expanding students’ understanding of social justice, and which will potentially prepare students to be 21st century global citizens that are empowered and ready to evoke positive social change. The goals highlighted in the TDSB (2010) document include the incorporation of social justice learning activities by teachers into the classroom as a method of supporting students’ understandings of social justice, as well as providing students with opportunities to participate in activities on an annual basis that support their understanding of social justice issues that are prevalent within their local communities, as well as globally.

The Social Justice Action Plan also outlines key professional learning and engagement opportunities for teachers that will provide educators with social justice lessons, relevant curriculum plans, resources, professional development sessions, demonstrations, and networks through which teachers can share and exchange their best practices (TDSB, 2010). Most importantly, it highlights student engagement opportunities that students can participate in, including classroom curriculum opportunities, We Day, Social Justice Fair, youth-led campaigns, and student leadership and mentoring opportunities. According to the TDSB (2010) Social justice Action Plan, such initiatives, as outlined above will equip, “students with a clear sense of civic responsibility, as well as the opportunities they have to shape their communities’ social
development, [that] will encourage life-long citizenship, character development and other relevant skills” (p. 5), as well as provide students with “engagement in social justice on a global scale [that] will create opportunities for dialogue and action that will encourage the inclusion of these students’ experiences and perspectives, promoting equity and enriching the lives of all students involved” (p. 5).

The Social Justice Action Plan outlined by the Toronto District School Board provides teachers with a better understanding of their obligations regarding the incorporation of social justice education in the classroom. As presented throughout this action plan, the teaching of social issues is necessary and mandatory if we want our 21st century learners to engage in and think critically about the world. Thus, through such pedagogy, students will be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to commit to positive social change, in hopes of moving towards a more socially just world, as defined in the Social Justice Action Plan.

**Conceptual Framework: Critical Pedagogy**

A critical component of social justice education lies in developing a social consciousness and becoming an activist for social change; this activist should be continuously and consistently critical of the truisms they are frequently exposed to. In this research study, it is imperative that critical pedagogy within the context of social justice education is explored in order to demonstrate the pedagogical practices of educators who are explicitly connecting their pedagogy to issues of social justice in hopes of working towards equity, diversity, and justice. To frame this research, a brief overview of the origin and the theoretical tenets of critical pedagogy will be provided.
What is Critical Pedagogy?

Social justice educators dedicated to infusing social justice issues into their pedagogical practice ought to engage in critical pedagogy as a central framework. Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education that is dedicated to the analytical inquiry of cognizance, and it is a conceptual framework that combines the critiquing and changing of both society and culture, as outlined in critical theory within education. Described by Peter McLaren (1997), “critical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation state” (p. 1). McLaren adds that such pedagogy has developed out of a number of theoretical developments including, “Latin American philosophies of liberation; the pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire; the sociology of knowledge; the Frankfurt school of critical theory; feminist theory; and neo-Marxist cultural criticism” (McLaren, 1997, p.1).

Critical pedagogy explores and challenges the social, environmental, and economic social relations and structures that shape the conditions in which people live, as well as in which schools operate (McLaren & Smith, 2010). Moreover, “in the realm of public education, critical pedagogy is thus situated against class exploitation, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression that pervade the current education climate and the larger society” (McLaren & Smith, 2010, p. 333). A fundamental premise of critical pedagogy – as stated by one of the founders of the philosophy, Paulo Freire (1970) – is the importance of students’ learning to think critically and developing a critical consciousness. According to Garcia (2009), critical consciousness is defined as
the “ability to recognize and challenge oppressive and dehumanizing political, economic, and social systems” (p. 19). Patricia Ainsa (2011) presents the idea that “critical pedagogy is a relationship between teaching and learning” (p. 84). She explains that the students “participating in critical pedagogy go through a process of unlearning, learning, relearning, reflection, and evaluation” (Ainsa, 2011, p. 84). These processes of learning allow for those invested in critical pedagogy to be open to exploring and critiquing knowledge, which will allow for a transformation of education and society and, ultimately, assist with focusing on achieving a thorough understanding of the world, all of which is essential when working towards critical consciousness.

**Central Components of Critical Pedagogy**

According to Braa and Callero (2006), any serious application of critical pedagogy must identify with the following four central components: dialogue, critique, counter hegemony, and praxis. In terms of dialogue, Braa and Callero (2006) state that there needs to be active participation by both students and teachers in discussion and analysis. They say that engaging in dialogue around a critical examination of students’ experiences will both increase active student participation in the classroom, as well as help develop a critical social consciousness amongst the students. Secondly, critique is a central element of critical pedagogy. By critique, the authors are referring to “the systematic analysis of both self and society with a focus on inequality, exploitations, oppression, and domination” (Braa & Callero, 2006, p. 359). The third element that is essential within critical pedagogy is the construction of counter hegemony. Counter hegemony signifies an attempt to critique and demolish hegemonic power. Braa and Callero (2006) mention that such practice “involves the development of a counter culture
where oppositional values, attitudes, and behaviors are promoted” (p. 359). Lastly, the fourth principle component of critical pedagogy is praxis, “the actual application of knowledge to the transformation of society” (Braa & Callero, 2006, p. 359). The authors indicate that this is where the curriculum moves beyond the classroom, and action within the community transpires. This is where “collective efforts at social transformations” (p. 359) are seen, and were advancements in the community are endorsed. The application of these four central components of critical pedagogy can place teachers at an advantage with respect to achieving their ultimate goal of incorporating social justice education into their pedagogical practices in hopes of promoting diversity, equity, and justice within their classrooms and amongst their students.

**Multi-Pedagogies: Practices that Contribute to Social Justice Education**

In order for educators to work towards cultivating students’ knowledge and commitment to issues related to social justice, they must become informed about the use of pedagogical practices that can assist and contribute to their efforts of teaching for social justice. For the purpose of this study, the pedagogical practices that were reviewed included culturally responsive and relevant teaching, as well as inquiry-based pedagogy.

**Culturally Responsive and Relevant Teaching**

In order to understand what culturally responsive teaching entails, we must first define the term, “culture.” With respect to this study, culture is defined as the way we live. It is, “the clothes we wear, the foods we eat, the languages we speak, the stories we tell, and the ways we celebrate. Culture is also about roots. Where did our ancestors come from? What do we believe? What makes our lives different from the lives of others?” (Kalman, 2009, p. 4). When looked at through the lens of education, culturally responsive
teaching is an intersection of cultures, races, ethnicities, teachings, and learning. Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as the use of diverse students’ cultural knowledge and prior experiences to make learning more appropriate and effective for the students.

Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that intersects disciplines and cultures as a method of engaging the learners, while respecting their cultural integrity and ensuring the accommodations of all races, ethnicities, classes, genders, regions, religions, and families that contribute to each student’s cultural identity (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995; Gay, 2000). Ladson-Billings (1992) adds that culturally responsive teaching is an approach that is intended to empower the students’ intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning “using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 382). Such education that is aimed at purposely empowering and engaging students of color integrates “culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content” (Hollins, 1996, p. 13).

Culturally responsive teaching is multidimensional, and according to Gay (2000), culturally responsive teaching involves many things including, but not limited to, curriculum content, learning context, maintaining the cultural identity and heritage of the students, building a community amongst diverse learners, creating a classroom environment that is conducive to the learning of ethnically diverse students, student–teacher relationships, and instructional techniques. Such pedagogy prepares students to question racism, discrimination, and inequality. Teachers who use culturally responsive pedagogy respect the culture that the students bring to the class, and require that the
teachers willingly do whatever it is that is necessary to educate the students (Nieto, 2000).

Within the framework of social justice education, culturally responsive teaching has been proven to be an essential pedagogy in helping to embrace students’ diverse backgrounds and experiences. According to Esposito and Swain (2009), educators who implement culturally relevant pedagogy into their lessons help generate an awareness of social justice issues, whilst inspiring students to envision better work for themselves and their communities. They argue:

Through culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers enable their students to think critically about the injustices inherent in schools and the broader society. In other words, culturally relevant pedagogy is a vehicle for examining social injustices on both a micro- and macro level, thereby opening the door for the implementation of social justice pedagogy (Esposito & Swain, 2009, p. 38).

Their study makes evident the link between social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy, and its intrinsic ability to further teachers’ efforts in fostering equity, diversity, and justice. Culturally relevant pedagogy is proven to be a “mechanism for untimely attaining social justice” (Esposito & Swain, 2009, p. 38). By promoting social justice education through the use of culturally responsive teachings, students can work towards gaining a positive cultural identity, in addition to increasing their sociopolitical cognizance and their sense of agency.
Inquiry Pedagogy

Inquiry-based learning, sometimes referred to as discovery learning, is a pedagogical practice that is at the heart of student-centered approaches to education. It is a educational pedagogy, which uses a non-lecture structure with the instructor operating as a facilitator (Volkert, 2012). It is an approach to education that values the learner’s questions, as opposed to teacher-centered lessons. It is pedagogy where the learning is driven by a process of investigation, examination, and analysis. According to the YouthLearn Initiative (2001), inquiry-based learning is:

Inspired by what is sometimes called a constructivist approach to education, which posits that there are many ways of constructing meaning from the building block of knowledge and that imparting the skills of how to learn is more important than any particular information being presented (p. 4).

Inquiry-based schooling is a pedagogy that allows students to become active participants in the learning process, and it is a platform where students are able to identify their own issues and questions (What is Inquiry Based Learning, 2014).

Inquiry-based learning is a constructivist philosophy within education where knowledge is built from experience, process, discussion, and collaboration. As a result, such pedagogy is an educational practice that is conducive to facilitating the development of social justice learning in the classroom. Within inquiry-based learning, students are encouraged to ask questions, gather information and ideas, examine the material, and make efficient and logical attempts to answer the questions through deep analysis and acquisition. Similarly, social justice education promotes the critical consciousness of diversity in education by addressing issues through questioning, examination, and
analysis, and these are primarily student centered. Social justice education fosters the cultivation of students’ voices, and it works with students to develop the skills necessary to become analytical and to question, rather than conform. Inquiry-based learning will provide students with such opportunities to learn and practice how to pose questions and problems, as well as how to draw conclusions that are not based on pre-established truths, but rather on the students’ individual knowledge.

**Summary**

As this literature review demonstrates, much research has been conducted on social justice education and the need for educators to incorporate such pedagogy into their classroom practices. Social justice teachings are significant to promoting equity, diversity, and justice, as well as for facilitating positive social change. Within the educational setting, educators that teach social justice are dedicated to helping students become agents of change by developing a critical consciousness in hopes of being more cynical of commonly accepted truisms. Considering the literature reviewed on social justice education, the following chapters will provide my research with the framework necessary to determine the best social justice-based pedagogical practices that current experienced educators are incorporating into their classroom.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In order to conduct my research on the ways in which urban Ontario educators incorporate social justice issues into their educational practice, I conducted a literature review, recruited and interviewed experienced and knowledgeable educators, analyzed interview transcripts, and synthesized the findings. This chapter outlines each of the phases in the research project, including procedures, participants, data analysis, the ethical review procedures, and the limitations of this qualitative research study.

Procedure

Literature Review

This research study on the incorporation of social justice education in the classroom was undertaken by reviewing the relevant literature on this subject. The purpose of the literature review was to highlight the critical points of the current knowledge on social justice education, the TDSB’s policies on social justice education, critical pedagogy, and the pedagogical practices that contribute to social justice education. The literature review was necessary to help inform the questions asked during the interviews, and they subsequently served as a catalyst for future comparisons of the findings obtained during the data collection process. The main goal of this literature review was to position the research behind this project within the existing body of literature, as well as to provide a detailed context for the readers.
Data Collection

The primary means of collecting data for this qualitative research study was through sixty-minute, one-on-one semi-structured interviews that were conducted with four urban Ontario practicing teachers. This type of data was essential for my research goal of understanding the ways in which educators incorporate social justice education into their practices. With the assistance of my professors at OISE, I was able to locate and interview teachers who were strongly committed to this topic and had experience integrating social justice education in their classrooms.

In preparation for the interviews, I developed a list of interview questions that were reviewed and approved by my research supervisor (see Appendix B). My research questions were divided into four main sections: background information, personal and conceptual understanding of social justice, incorporating social justice issues into educational practice, and recommendations for future educators of social justice. The goal was to reveal and discover what pedagogical implications that social justice education can have in the classroom. Each of the four interviews was digitally recorded, and each of the voice recordings was transcribed.

Participants

In order to ensure the maximum value from the interview process, it was essential to locate interview candidates who were experienced and knowledgeable in incorporating social justice issues into their educational practice. Participants currently involved in promoting the use of social justice education in the classroom were selected for the interviews. The interviewees were all urban Ontario educators from Toronto, Ontario, who were selected by myself (with referrals from faculty members at OISE) based on the
willingness of the candidate to participate in the project, as well as on how well the participants understood what the study involved. The strict criteria that were used to select interview participants were based on the individual’s inclination to participate; the participant’s knowledge of social justice education; and the participant’s application of social justice pedagogy and instruction in the classroom. The individuals who were interviewed were all professionals who worked in the field, and whose academic and professional work incorporated issues of equity, diversity, and social justice. Educators of various backgrounds and experiences were selected to participate in the study with the hopes of involving diverse individuals who were willing to partake in the study. Prior to agreeing to be interviewed, each participant was given information about who I am, why I wanted to interview him or her, what I wished to gain out of the interview. The purpose of the interviews was made clear to interviewees before we proceeded. Overall, the participants provided useful information about their practices as social justice educators, and they also offered valuable recommendations for educators interested in teaching for social justice.

**Data Analysis**

In the data analysis process, each interview was transcribed and analyzed individually. After reading and reviewing each interview, the coding process commenced. The initial coding took the form of jotting down my thoughts about what I had collected in the margins of the interview transcript. As I started to see patterns, I found myself jotting down potential categories or themes that I might use. This initial coding step was critical in the data analysis process because it was where I initially begin developing and filtering interpretations in the interview. That process truly helped with
the next step in the coding process – looking for common categories and themes. Here, I focused on locating consistent themes in each of the participant’s interviews. I used different colored pens to identify and distinguish between the common patterns, themes, quotes, and insights in the interview data. This process helped with ensuring consistency in responses from participant to participant. From there, I compiled a list of themes and subthemes to help focus the data. The major themes and sub-themes that surfaced from the four interviews are as follows:

- Experiences that Informed Social Justice Understandings
- Interpreting and Conceptualizing Social Justice/Education
- The Role of the Instructor in Social Justice Teaching
- Implementing Social Justice Education into the Classroom
- Challenges of Incorporating Social Justice Education in the Classroom
- Recommendations for Incorporating Social Justice Education in the Classroom

After categorizing my findings into the six themes, I proceeded to make connections between my participants’ comments, and I connected the primary research findings with the available information from the literature review.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

All of the ethical principles for this research, as outlined by OISE and my supervisor, were followed for this qualitative research study. Each of the interviewed participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis. They were each advised of the interview process and were given information about the recording and transcribing of the data collected. When discussing the ethical standards for this project, participants were promised the following: autonomy, protection from exploitation, and respecting the
participant’s integrity. Once the participant made arrangements to partake in the research study, the participant was provided with a letter of informed consent. The informed consent document is meant to serve as an agreement between the researcher and the participants regarding what it means to participate in this type of research study. This was used to ensure that the individuals who were being researched could make a conscious decision about whether or not they would like to participate in the study. The informed consent letter (see Appendix A) that the participants in this study were given included the following information:

- Research Purpose
- Conditions of Participating
- Risks and Confidentiality
- Withdrawing from Participating
- Consent

Each participant was asked to read and sign the letter of consent, indicating his or her approval and willingness to participate in the research study. The participants and I each kept a copy of the consent form for our records.

**Limitations**

Due to the small sample size of four participants, the opinions and experiences expressed by the teachers in this study may not accurately represent the diverse opinions and experiences regarding teachers’ practices on this topic of social justice education. As a result, the transferability of results is limited. For example, two of the four participants work within the same school, and three of the four participants are affiliated within the same board of education. However, despite the limited number of participants in the
study, I feel that this research is nevertheless valuable, as I was able to gain meaningful and practical insights that I could potentially apply to my own classroom.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

Social justice is a commonly acknowledged concept that encourages individuals to identify and combat injustices worldwide. As an initiative to teach for social justice, educators are encouraged to better prepare students to understand and address issues pertaining to diversity and social justice both locally within their communities, as well as globally. In order to encourage and assist teachers in the use of social justice teachings, I have inquired into the best practices for integrating social justice education into urban Ontario classrooms. Investigating the ways in which four knowledgeable intermediate/senior social justice educators in Toronto, Ontario, incorporate such pedagogy into their educational practice collected the findings for this qualitative research study. All of the interviewees selected for the study had experience in implementing social justice education in the classroom. They each offered valuable perceptions and intuition on their professional experiences and education relating to social justice. The data from the interviews were reviewed, and common themes emerged regarding the participants’ understandings of social justice, and how they informed and incorporated such pedagogy into the urban classroom. For this research study, each of the participants remained anonymous through the use of pseudonyms.

The first participant interviewed, Kasey, is a female urban Ontario educator who currently teaches French and Science. She is also the special education and art coordinator at a middle school. Kasey is in her fourth year of teaching and is employed within the Toronto District School Board at alternative schools, and her philosophy is developed around the arts, critical thinking, and social justice. She graduated with an
Honors Bachelor of Science, majoring in Psychology, with a double minor in Sociology and History, and she completed her Bachelor of Education.

Leila is an experienced teacher at the same Toronto District School Board alternative school as Kasey. She is currently in her thirtieth year of teaching, educating grades seven and eight in English, History, and Science. She completed a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in English and History, and she has also earned her Master’s of Education and a Bachelor of Education degree.

Corinne is a middle school teacher at an urban Ontario school in Toronto’s west end. She has been teaching at the same inner-city school for her entire teaching profession – ten years. She has a Bachelor of Science specializing in Biological Anthropology. She completed her Bachelor of Education degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She is currently teaching a grade six gifted Language Arts, Math, and Social Studies homeroom. In addition, Corinne is the rotary grade six Family Studies and Visual Arts teacher.

Lastly, Riana teaches intermediate English, Law, and Individuals and Families at an urban private school in Toronto’s west end. She attained an Honors Bachelor Degree from the University of Toronto, studying International Relations and World History. Riana has been teaching in the private school system for approximately four-and-a-half years.
Themes

The major themes and sub-themes that surfaced from the four interviews are as follows:

- **Experiences that informed social justice understandings:**
  Here, the familial experiences, sociocultural understandings, and educational experiences that have informed each participant’s understanding of social justice will be studied.

- **Interpreting and Conceptualizing Social Justice/Education:**
  In this section, the participant’s understandings on what social justice is and why social justice education is important will be examined.

- **The Role of the Instructor in Social Justice Education**
  The participant’s analysis of their specific roles as an instructor will be investigated, and each participant will provide insights as to how they bring their individual identities to the classroom, and how they infer their role as change agents.

- **Implementing Social Justice Education in the Classroom**
  In this section of the data, each of the participant’s approaches to implementing social justice education is explored. They include the establishment of a classroom environment that is conducive to social justice teaching, as well as incorporating culturally relevant/responsive and inquiry-based pedagogy into the classroom to aid in their teaching of social justice education.

- **Factors Influencing Social Justice Education**
  Here, the participants’ responses to the factors that influence social justice education will
be reviewed, with a specific focus placed on the students’ learning and understanding.

- Challenges and Teacher Recommendations

In the final section of this paper, teachers’ challenges and recommendations for incorporating social justice pedagogy into their classroom will be reviewed, while focusing on the issues of deconstructing students’ preconceived beliefs. In addition, recommendations for teachers’ practices will be addressed, such as seeking knowledge and engaging in self-advocacy for teachers looking to incorporate such practices into their classroom.

Experiences That Informed Social Justice Understandings

The views and beliefs we hold as individuals and educators are directly synched with the ways in which we carry out our teaching practices. In order to understand the ways in which urban teachers incorporate social justice education into their instructive practices, we must examine and analyze the ways in which these views and beliefs have come to be shaped and socially constructed. The participants of this study acknowledged the experiences that have enthused and inspired their undertaking to teach for social justice. In this section of the study, I will examine the four participants’ understandings of social justice, as informed through their families, their sociocultural experiences, and their schooling.

Familial experiences informing social justice understanding

When asked about where her initial understandings of social justice were informed, Kasey referred to her home life and, more specifically, to her parents and their dedication to human rights. Having a parent working in the United Nations allowed
Kasey to become immersed in a world that was dedicated to protecting the rights and freedoms of individuals. She mentioned that her very first understandings of social justice came from her father and his “deeply enriching and diverse career with the United Nations.” Having parents who were open-minded allowed Kasey to view the world, and individuals, in an impartial and equitable way.

Comparably, Corinne and Riana attribute their initial understanding of social justice to their families and the experiences they had growing up in their countries of origin. Corinne mentioned that she was forced to understand the difference between justice and injustice from a very early age due to the apartheid state of her home country. Growing up in South Africa, she said:

"Going to school in what the rest of the world calls a developing country kind of gives you a different insight, and so right from your early years, you are made aware of privilege and who does and doesn’t have access to that privilege (Corrine)."

Similarly, Riana mentions that she and her family had witnessed and experienced similar injustices in her birth country of Somalia. Growing up and seeing the start of a civil war is an image that Riana and her family remember deeply: “Living to see a civil war and the lack of fairness and justice and the mass murders of innocent lives really informs one’s understanding of justice and or the lack of it.” The awareness of these world issues and the politics of justice informed by her family and their experiences in Somalia helped to develop and ignite Riana’s consciousness of social issues and the need to demand change. Much like Riana, the impact of war has left devastating effects on individuals, including myself. Being forced to leave your home and then your country for
fear of death based on your tribe leaves inordinate memories of injustice infiltrated in your mind. As Riana echoed, the journey from living through a civil war and escaping a country that has been engulfed with violence and poverty really does inform one’s understanding of justice. While this study does not focus on the diaspora and/or war exiles, it is important to acknowledge that social justice is necessary to understand conflicts and inequalities from around the world.

Lastly, Leila describes her development of social justice understandings in connection to her brother’s sexual identity as a gay man. She recollects many instances where her brother was discriminated against and treated unfairly as a result of his sexuality. Having a family that was accepting and unbiased allowed her to have reformist beliefs and worldviews, which was in contrast to the people within her community who stigmatized individuals, like her brother, because of sexuality. At a time when homosexuality was greatly scrutinized, Leila knew that she had to “help change these unwarranted and hateful modes of thinking.” Those experiences informed Leila’s understandings of social justice and have motivated her aspiration to commit herself to educating people on diversity, equality, and social justice.

In examining these participants’ understanding of social justice, it was fascinating to note the connections they made between their familial experiences and how their understandings of social justice have been informed by those occurrences. I strongly believe that our early years with our families color the ways in which we think and construct meaning. The things we witness and the experiences we have had really do have a major influence on how we come to identify and understand what social justice is. Each of the four participants within this study confirms that their familial interactions
and, specifically, what they have been exposed to as a result of who their family is or where their family has lived has certainly influenced and aided in developing their understandings concerning social justice.

Sociocultural understandings of social justice

The participants revealed that a key factor informing their understandings of social justice persisted around sociocultural indoctrination. Each of the participants was exposed to diverse cultural and ethnically varied sociocultural groups throughout their lives. Their connections and memberships to such cultural and social crowds have contributed to their understandings of social justice. Each participant identified sociocultural factors that impacted and informed their understanding of social justice. Those factors included racism, violence, and socioeconomic differences.

For Riana, the racializing, gendering, and policing of her brother and cousins was a major factor informing her understanding of justice but, more specially, of injustice. It made her aware of the systemic organizations of institutions within our society that work to disadvantage individuals of color – particularly black males. In her experiences, racism is at the forefront of social justice. Having seen so many of the black males in her life monitored and racialized, Riana has come to terms with the fact that “the systems within our society treat people differently based on race.” She discussed having “cousins, male black cousins and [her] brother who have all been victims of racial profiling and who have had brushes with the law, because their simply black.” Such incidents have made Riana cognizant of social justice issues within her society. Her experiences at an early age taught her “the long arm of the law, specifically when it comes to justice, is longer for some than others.”
Corinne echoed Riana’s comments that she also has observed various racial injustices that have informed her social justice understandings. She acknowledged that “racism within South African policies allowed for the systematic segregation and discrimination on the grounds of race” and that that was a major factor behind her sociocultural understandings of social justice.

Meanwhile, Kasey disclosed that socioeconomic status was a significant component in informing her understanding of social justice. Having known many people who fell on the lower spectrum of the socioeconomic pay scale, Kasey talked about the social problems revolving around government housing in Toronto, and how that has informed her understanding of social justice. She discusses the ways in which “the privatization and elimination of social housing in the city is widespread.” This impacted and informed her understanding of social justice, as she witnessed the dispossession of the needs of low-income families within Toronto.

Leila, on the other hand, briefly expressed her sociocultural informing of social justice through politics and acts of violence that were occurring in her hometown of Quebec City when she was growing up. She described the cultural divide amongst the Anglophones and the Francophones in her hometown of Quebec as a central cause for informing her sociocultural understandings of social justice. She said:

I grew up in Quebec, so there was the huge divide between French and English speaking people, and I was very aware of that. So I think that contributed to my understanding of the cultural differences within my society. I also grew up during – I was aware during the October crisis, which is, you know, the terrorist situation that happened in Quebec and
Montreal. All these cultural differences and violent altercations helped me understand the programmatic social issues happening with our society (Leila).

Leila, in addition to the other participants’ explanations, revealed the importance of one’s sociocultural background within the realm of social justice. Through their own individual experiences, they each credit the fact that both social and cultural origins do inform one’s understandings of social justice.

It is interesting to note that each of the four participants’ sociocultural understandings of social justice are so varied and complex, which sheds light on the copious injustices that exist within our societies and how they impact people in differing ways.

**Educational experiences informing social justice understanding**

When asked about their educational experiences that informed their understandings of social justice, the major consensus was that there was not any formal training that was provided to them on how to teach for social justice. In regards to the four participants in this research study, their schooling experiences – both undergraduate and pre-service teacher education programs – did not appear to reinforce explicit understandings of social justice. Rather, the participants were all consistent in their remarks in that they felt their educational experience lacked effective pedagogy surrounding social justice and social justice concepts. The participants all echoed Leila’s response when asked if their educational experience addressed social justice issues: “Oh. No. Not at all. I do not recall ever learning about social justice in school. Almost everything I learned about social justice and social change was out of the school context.”
For Kasey, the lack of social justice understanding within her teacher education program was a major disappointment. She mentions:

I actually chose that program because it was supposed to [incorporate social justice education]. It did touch on it because the program itself, the location was in the heart of Regent Park [the oldest and largest social housing project in Toronto], so it was amazing. But unfortunately, a lot of the content didn't focus on that, as you would think it would because its location – and the reason why I chose that, but it didn't and unfortunately you had to sort of learn by osmosis because you're going to schools that are located in Regent Park, and so you're learning about social justice by observing. But was it taught? Probably less than I would've expected. So yeah. (Kasey).

Kasey reiterates her disappoint with the failure of her teacher education program to advance and cultivate her social justice understandings, something for which she so desperately longed. However, she was fortunate enough to be in an urban setting that allowed for her to “learn by osmosis” – learning by observing the environment in which she was placed.

At OISE, I was fortunate to have had a very different experience from those of the research participants. As a student researcher, I had the opportunity to take a course in anti-discriminatory education that focused on the integration of theory and practice with a strong emphasis on uncovering our own biases, values, and beliefs, and how that then informs our teaching practice. Knowledge is power, and the anti-discriminatory course at OISE has assisted me immensely in my efforts to teach for social justice.
Interpreting and Conceptualizing Social Justice/Education

In this section, I explore Kasey’s, Leila’s, Corinne’s, and Riana’s interpretations and conceptualizations of social justice and social justice education. As discussed in Chapter Two of the literature review, it is essential that we remember that social justice is a concept that is definitionally complex, but that is often associated with concepts such as diversity, equity, and justice. Social justice is a concept that is individually constructed and given meaning based on the lived experiences and interactions that people have both within their communities and globally, and as a result, people interpret the concept in differing ways. In analyzing the participants’ responses to what they perceive social justice to be, it was evident that their experiences that informed their understandings of social justice (as discussed in the earlier section of this chapter) helped them to define and interpret their meanings of social justice.

What is social justice?

When asked what social justice meant to them, each participant gave diverse but parallel responses. The personal experiences, worldviews, and values that each participant was exposed to have greatly influenced their justification of what social justice meant to them. As mentioned, all of the participants’ definitions were wide-ranging, but each was analogous to the next.

Leila and Riana admitted that defining social justice with one generic definition was hard to do because social justice was too complex of a concept to easily give one decisive definition. Leila said, “Social justice is huge.” For her, social justice was all about equal rights and opportunities for everyone within society. She said that there is not one issue that infiltrates social justice. For Leila:
Social justice is anything – it’s what matters. It’s the issues of sexism, racism, classism and sexuality. It’s the issues of what’s happening in our environment. It’s those critical things that are happening in the world around us and that inform us and make – where you can make a difference. (Leila)

Leila’s idea of social justice is not solely based on one concept and one view. For her, it is something that permeates many aspects of our lives and the societies in which we reside. Riana shared in Leila’s struggle to define social justice because “it means something different to every individual.” She said that social justice “is kind of one of those everlasting concepts,” and she felt that social justice was about having “the ability to realize people’s potential in society and to recognize and fight for the fair and equitable treatment of all people within our societal institutions.”

Corinne ricocheted Leila’s and Riana’s comment that social justice was really too extensive of a concept to define. She described it as “all of things – issues in the world.” Social justice is “anything that has to do with people – the suffering of human beings or any kind of injustice toward human beings.” However, what was interesting and different about Corinne’s definition of social justice, was that even though her early experiences that informed her understanding of social justice revolved around racism, her description of what social justice meant to her orbited more around the environmental crisis in the world.

Kasey believes that social justice cannot be looked at as a straight line with only one direction. When asked to give an example of what social justice meant to her, Kasey provided the following statement to describe how she viewed social justice:
So you’ve got a classroom of students and for some reason, they’re all missing shoes. Equality would be to go and get pairs of shoes for everybody and just give it, regardless of the size. So you'd get all size eights, great. Equity and social justice would be to go and interview each student, find out what their size is, and get the appropriate shoe size for that student. So social justice is the idea that you take each person and their experiences and their – I guess their being into consideration and in whatever environment you're doing whatever you're doing. So whether it's education or whether it's work, or whether it's art, whether it's just sort of leisure, and so on. It’s just everywhere. (Kasey)

For Kasey, the concept of social justice is extremely fluid within her life. She believes that it should be integrated and implemented in everything we do because “social justice is a way of being.” As a future social justice educator, I believe that it is imperative that teachers come into the classroom with a concrete idea of what social justice means to them, and the use that to help students make sense of and build upon their own understandings. Social justice has become a buzzword that is often thrown around without a clear idea of what the individual is really referring to. As a result, when introducing complex concepts, it is essential that students do not simply take social justice at face value; rather, they should critique what other have said about the term and then figure out how they interpret it and what it means to them. Social justice encompasses many things and holds different meanings for each individual. As an educator working to build a classroom community, I believe that it is essential that an understanding of social justice and its meaning are articulated and constructed together as
Why is teaching social justice education important?

Each of the participants interviewed for this study were active social justice advocates who consistently incorporated social justice pedagogy into their classroom practices. Each of their philosophies of education incorporated various aspects of the advancement of social justice into their educational practice. They all made conscious and deliberative efforts to infuse their classrooms with engaging social justice-based practices because they felt like it was an imperative aspect in enriching their students’ learning.

For Kasey, teaching social justice issues is important because she believes that these issues affect the students both at an individual and universal level, and she indicates that they need to be knowledgeable as to how these issues came about, how they affect people, and how we as members of world can work towards social change. She believes that social justice education is important because “it promotes critical thinking and the ways students work together.” By teaching students about social justice issues, Kasey believes that we can help students make connections and we are helping them “to be able to place themselves in the world,” which is an important aspect in assisting our students in learning about themselves and the world in which they reside.

Leila and Riana both mention the importance of social justice in changing students’ modes of thinking and understanding when interpreting the injustices that take place in the world. They both mention the importance of using a social justice lens to help create agents of social change out of their students, who are dedicated to making positive changes in their local communities as well as globally. For Riana, choosing to
consciously teach social justice is important because she wants students to be able to realize and be aware of the world they live in and the injustices that take place within it.

Social justice education is important simply because without education, you really can't have social justice. I mean how do you know whether society is just or not if you don't even know what a just society looks like, or what an unjust society looks like? So we as teachers have to make that known to them by teaching them just on a fundamental level, and then from there, like, build onto – further and further, I guess, the concept of what social justice is. And so hopefully by the end of the course, the student walks away with a deeper understanding and looks at their society also through a social justice lens, you know? And that they're able to interpret what injustice and justice looks like, you know? (Riana).

For both Riana and Leila, the students’ ability to interpret social injustices is vital to their understanding and their growth as both a learner in the classroom and as a well-informed member of society. Leila says that “our world is in trouble” and that as educators, it is important that we build students’ awareness of social justice and encourage them to make sense of it so they can join the struggle to fight it. Social justice is truly not possible without education, and as educators, we have an obligation to inform our students on such topics. We must ensure that our educational practices are conducive to the facilitation and development of social justice learning in our classrooms.

What was interesting about Corrine’s response to why social justice is important was that she was heavily focused on the importance of creating global citizens of her students. For her, teaching social justice is done with the goal of empowering students to
become aware of the wider world and to acknowledge their role as a citizen of the world with respect to valuing diversity and equity amongst all. For her, “social justice and global citizenship go hand-in-hand and it’s important that us teachers assist our students to become responsible citizen of the world and to know about what goes on in the world.”

As social justice advocate, I agree with Corrine in that we need to develop civic knowledge and consciousness in our students. It is essential that we provide students with the necessary understanding and skills needed to comprehend the goings on of a globalized world. This will, in turn, provide students with what they need to be local, national, and global social justice advocates who will work against injustices.

The Role of the Instructor in Social Justice Teaching

The participants in this study each mentioned the importance of recognizing the role of teachers when incorporating social justice practices into urban classrooms that are characterized by students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. In this section of the research study, I will look into why the participants viewed their personal identities as being a significant factor when incorporating social justice into educational practices, and how their role as agents of change plays out within the classroom.

Bringing the Teachers’ Identity and Knowledge into the Classroom

When asked about their personal identities in relation to how they incorporate social justice education into the classroom, the participants each mentioned the significance of investigating their own lives and how their views, beliefs, and knowledge on social justice will both affect and reinforce their teachings. For these teachers, as educators, they recognized their role in the students’ learning. Each participant
understood her role in modeling learning and diversity in order to expand their students’
learning in social justice education.

Leila, a participant who was in her thirtieth year of teaching, noted that being a
teacher did not mean you could simply walk into a classroom and start talking about
common social justice issues that are frequently witnessed within society. She said as a
teacher, “first of all, you have to make yourself knowledgeable on what you’re teaching.”
In addition, “you have to uncover your own biases and investigate your own modes of
thinking before you can really challenge students’ ways of thinking.” She says that you
need to be able to look at issues from different perspectives and that you have to be ready
to handle and respond to students in a way that informs their learning. You really have to
take the time to investigate what you are teaching, and you should really educate yourself
on the topics. Leila says that to be a teacher of social justice, “It takes dedication,
motivation and time. You have to be willing to put the time in and remember that it takes
years to really get the hang of things.”

When interviewing Kasey, she had a lot to say about the role of the teachers in
social justice education. She recognizes that the world is constantly changing, and so are
our ways of thinking and viewing the world. As a result, she suggests that teachers need
to “forever continue their learning and forever continuing being students of social justice
so that [they] can continually add to their knowledge base.” Like Leila, Kasey also argues
that teachers must force themselves to examine their own perspectives and evaluate them
because “teachers uncovering their own beliefs, experiences and biases will only assist in
teaching for social justice.” In order to understand and acknowledge students’
perspectives, Kasey believes that we must first investigate and deconstruct our own views
to ensure our transparency as teachers of social justice in the urban classroom.

Both Riana and Corrine discuss the passion that teachers of social justice must have in order to be effective and powerful teachers. Riana says, “as educators, we can’t expect our students to care about issues that we don’t care for ourselves.” Students are very observant in that they can sense how invested teachers really are in what they are teaching. When asked about teachers’ interest in what they are teaching, Riana replied:

Teachers have to have depth, you know what I mean? They need to have belief behind what it is [they] are teaching, or else it’s just – it’s hollow and it does really mean much. So, teachers need to be passionate so that students can feel that, you know? If you really are invested in what you’re teaching, you’ll more than likely leave a lasting impression on the students. (Riana).

Corrine adds to Riana’s remarks by stating that one way to ensure that your students feel your desire for social justice is by “starting with what you are really passionate about.” If there is a specific issue or topic that interests you most, start with that. I harmonize with the participants in that educators should bring their identities into their classroom practices as a method of instruction, though only after they have taken the time to really deconstruct their views and evaluate their own ways of thinking. However, I would deviate from Riana’s statement regarding teaching what you are most passionate about first. I recognize the fact that we should be passionate about what we are bringing into the classroom; however, I think it is central to the students’ learning that we bring in materials and issues that our students are passionate about. A major aspect in social justice education is cultivating our students’ voices. How do we do that? By bringing in
issues, topics, and materials that our students are passionate about, and that are important to and of interest in their lives.

**Teacher as the Change Agent**

One of the main questions I had regarding social justice education was who is responsible for bringing about change? For this research study, each of the four participants acknowledged the role that teachers play in being the implementer of the change initiative for students within social justice education.

Both Riana and Kasey talked a lot about self-realization and working with students to create a certain type of consciousness about themselves and the world. As a teacher, Riana says being a change agent means “using your expertise, your background and your knowledge, as a teacher to change modes of thinking with the students.” Riana says that she will often come across a student with prejudiced beliefs and thoughts, and that as the teacher – and more specifically, a teacher of social justice – it is her responsibility to “penetrate that thinking and start to turn the wheels by presenting material and information that will start to have them think about an issue in a different way, you know.” When asked what Kasey thought teacher as change agents meant, she replied:

So I guess teachers as change agents can mean a few different thing. One of the things I would think about is the sociocultural consciousness. I guess it's figuring out and understanding, an in-depth understanding of your own way of thinking, your own way of behaving, and your own way of being, and so much more, obviously. But your own way of understanding how you learn as a teacher and how you teach and then how
you’re going to use that in consideration with your student’s ways of thinking and learning, and create a constructive atmosphere that allows for critical thinking and multiple perspective taking. (Kasey).

For Riana and Kasey, they wish to see their students avoiding generalizations and beginning to think about concepts and issues through multiple lenses and in a critical manner.

On the other hand, Corinne used a metaphor to describe what role she has played as an agent of change. She says:

Students are like seeds that need to be watered in order for them to become strong and powerful trees. As the teacher, I am the fountain of water that must nourish these seeds in order to ensure their growth. As a change agent, it is my responsibility to fulfill the job of the water by providing my students with the necessities they need to thrive and succeed. (Corrine).

For Corinne, her role as an agent of change is all encompassing of her responsibility as a teacher. She weighs the obligations placed on her as a teacher to a high degree. Her job as a teacher is to contribute to society by ensuring the future adults and change makers in her class are ready to handle the issues and concerns that so heavily impact our societies.

Leila’s understandings of being a change agent reiterated what Corinne, Riana, and Kasey have already articulated. However, what differed was her view on time and the role that it played in her career as a teacher. Leila feels that the amount of time spent with the students almost guarantees her position as a change agent. She says:

There’s no getting around the fact that teachers are change agents, right? I
mean, we see the kids and have more interactions with them than anyone else really. We spend so much time discussing their thoughts and their feelings, and their concerns. (Leila).

She views that the amount of time spent interacting with the students almost confirms that her impact and influence in the students’ lives is abundant.

Next to their parents, teachers probably have the second biggest influence in the lives of students. I agree with Kasey that as educators, we need to cultivate critical thinkers in our students and ground their knowledge in academically rigorous teachings that work to expand students’ consciousness and depictions of the world. I believe that Leila’s idea surrounding the concept that spending a great deal of time with the students automatically renders us as change agents is flawed. I have personally experienced classes where I have spent ample time with educators and was never really influenced by them. I think that being agents of change precedes time. Teaching for social justice is powerful teaching; through such pedagogy, we are teaching students about the injustices that have taken place, and continue to take place, in this world, and we are then working to prepare students to deal with such injustices.

**Implementing Social Justice Education in the Classroom**

In this section of the research study, discourses on implementing social justice education into instruction practices are discussed and analyzed. The purpose of this study was to find the best practices for incorporating social justice pedagogy in the classroom. The four participants in this study provided insights into their perspectives on how to incorporate social justice education into the urban classroom. These discussions allow the teachers in the study to confer how they take their experiences and knowledge on social
justice education and bring it to life through their practices in the classroom.

**Establishing a Classroom Environment**

Each of the participants discussed the importance of establishing a safe space where students felt secure to talk about social justice issues. What was interesting was how the teachers interpreted the word, “safe.” Safe did not mean comfortable. Kasey mentioned that, “for social justice education to happen, students need to move out their comfort zone. For learning to transpire, students need to be uncomfortable so that they can expand their learning.” For Kasey, she believes that students need to discuss controversial topics and feel a sense of discomfort to really comprehend and absorb the goings on of the world – both good and bad. They need to have that “shock factor for them to really learn and really understand and really start to break down these complex issues and concepts.” As outlined in Chapter Two of this research study, In order for students to partake in critical pedagogy, such as social justice education, there needs to be active participation by both the students and the teachers to ensure that the classroom culture is conducive to such pedagogy.

For these teachers, safe did not mean sheltering students from the injustices that exist, nor did it mean ignoring contentious topics and issues. Creating safer environments in the classroom was about respecting each other and our differences. Corinne mentions that “students need to be mindful of that fact that everyone has different values and beliefs and that we must respect each other regardless of differences and regardless of how little we agree with their views.” Riana mentions that the “opinions of our students are widely varied,” and as a result, teachers must facilitate classroom environments to ensure everyone’s opinions are heard. As the educator, it is our responsibility to ensure
that we are facilitating dialogue, and that each participant is recognized and valued.

Lastly, Leila and Kasey add that creating a safe atmosphere and classroom environment will allow students the ability to freely, but respectfully, engage in effective discussions and conversations about social justice. Kasey suggests that teachers looking to incorporate social justice issues into their classrooms must work towards “creating a safe atmosphere from the very beginning of the school year.” If students are aware of the expectations and guidelines of the classroom, and emphasis on respect is established from the start, “discussions on social justice issues like race, gender and sexuality will be able to transpire in a productive and civil way.” I agree with Kasey in that students need to know exactly what is accepted and expected of them from the very initiation of such pedagogy in the classroom. I reason that discussing issues of justice can spark great debate and controversy amongst classmates, and as the educator, we must establish a blueprint for how to handle these situations when circumstances arise.

**Culturally Relevant/Responsive Teaching**

When asked about how teachers can incorporate the students’ identities into the learning and teaching process, the most common answer was to use culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy. As discussed in Chapter Two, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that intersects disciplines and cultures as a method of engaging the learners, while respecting their cultural integrity and ensuring the accommodations of all races, ethnicities, classes, genders, regions, religions, and families that contribute to every student’s cultural identity (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995; Gay, 2000). Leila, Kasey, Corrine, and Riana all agreed that a central and key aspect of incorporating social justice
education into the urban classroom is centered around really getting to know the students and learning about their individual identities, cultures, and diverse backgrounds.

Kasey felt that a major part of teaching for social justice is having the opportunity to challenge, confront, and examine the social issues that students within her classroom experience on a personal level. For her, “framing [her] teaching practices to engage students in their learning” through their own lives and cultures is important in helping them understand the social issues they encounter and experience. All students come into the classroom having witnessed or experience some form of injustice, so it is key that we acknowledge that. Kasey says that when we talk about issues that do not relate to the students, they have a hard time placing themselves in the learning. She says that before she actually started using the students’ experiences to gauge her instructional strategies, “[her] students often felt like they were on the outside and that social justice is just another thing that doesn’t relate to them.” Kasey mentions that a large part of social justice education in her classroom involves working with students to make connections, while helping them to place themselves in the world. All of our students have a place in the world, and as educators, we can help them find their niche and help them to locate their place within society. Sometimes students feel like their identities, be it race, class, or sexuality, are a result of their own ways of being, but Kasey wants her students to understand how their issues are affecting them, while also helping them learn how the students’ identities relate to bigger issues and bigger systematic and unjust functions within society. As teachers, we must remember that we cannot teach one way and through one perspective because the faces and the voices within our classroom are diverse. As social justice educators, we must teach to that diversity. When incorporating
social justice education, Kasey says that educators must remember that, “Education needs to represent the people that it is for.” If we are not using who the students are to gauge the learning process, we are failing to really bring our students’ identities into the classroom, subsequently pushing them further away.

Leila’s position as a teacher in an alternative school that focused on social justice values allowed for her to really integrate the students into this discourse. She says that many of the students at her school have left their original schools for many different reasons including feeling discriminated against based on their gender, religion, and sexuality. Leila says that her students felt like they could not be or express who they wanted to be in their previous school, so at this school, the staff members try to celebrate everyone by incorporating the cultures, experiences, and backgrounds of the students in the learning. Leila says that for her, “incorporating social justice education in the classroom needs to touch upon the experiences of the students.” As a result, she says that she does not spend her summer planning each and every unit. Rather, she waits until she learns about the students in her class, and she then uses their cultures and experiences to shape the learning experience. When asked about how she accounts for her students’ backgrounds and identities in her teachings of social justice, she said that it is important to teach to the injustices that the students have experienced, but that “it’s also about teaching privilege and entitlement.” Similar to the research outlined on culturally responsive teaching (Chapter Two), Leila understands that teaching to our students is “about learning our students and where they come from and trying to help them make meaning of the systems of oppression and of privilege that play within our societies and the helping students’ construct meaning around that.”
Leila mentioned that a key method she strongly believes in is the notion of self-reflection. She says that an important predictor of social justice teaching in the classroom is “helping students to look at themselves as individuals in their communities and in the world.” She encourages students to have serious reflective thoughts that revolve around their character, their actions, and their motives, and to think about the implications this then has on their lives and on the lives of others. She says that this will encourage students to develop their cultural competence in terms of their ability to effectively interact and engage with people of backgrounds and cultures that differ from their own.

With respect to culturally responsive education, Corinne echoed many of the other participants’ strong support of such pedagogy in the classroom. However, she elaborated on the fact that when using such an approach, we must remember to be sensitive to our students’ identities and backgrounds. She says “we must consistently remember that there are going to be differences among cultures and differences that we don’t agree on. However, we must place a great value on diversity if we are going to be teaching for social justice.” Corinne stresses the significance in remembering that all of the cultures that we bring into the classroom will have similarities and differences, and we must be sensitive to and respectful of each other’s sentiments. Her response really resonates with the indication of creating a classroom community where each individual is respectful and mindful of each other’s beliefs, cultures, and experiences. In order for students to engage in meaningful dialogue, specifically dialogues of difference, we must guarantee that we are being sensitive to the students’ individualities of opinion and beliefs.

Riana’s conscious decision to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy into her classroom is based on the fact that she has, “students entering [her] classroom that face
multiple levels of injustices in many different ways. How can [she] ignore who they are and what they’ve been through in [her] teachings”? For her, guiding her students through the learning process through their cultures and experiences is essential to her pedagogical practices. Riana says that she needs to frequently “introduce materials to [her] students that is current and relevant to their lives, because then [you] notice that [you] get a better response from the students and they actually become invested in what’s happening In the classroom.” Each participant advocated that powerful teaching through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy will most certainly lead to powerful learning. Using who the students are in their learning is a great asset that can be used to teach in powerful and impactful ways that will almost certainly encourage students to invest in their education and effectively engage in their classroom community of learning.

Educators dedicated to teaching for social justice must guarantee that they are culturally competent if they want to positively impact and connect with their students. Students need access to an education that is going to make them knowledgeable and prepared for the world in which they reside. As a result, teachers must teach in such a way that students can understand. Through the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers must incorporate aspects of their students’ lives, cultures, backgrounds, and experiences into their instructional methods. According to the participants, as well as according to the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers must be knowledgeable of their students’ lives, and teach their students in a way that they can relate to and will understand. Educators must have respect for the cultural identities of their students and use that as a starting point to gauge their pedagogy and, ultimately, their students’ learning.
Inquiry-Based Learning

In examining the topic of social justice education and the various instructional approaches to implementing it within the classroom, each participant in the study emphasized the prominence of inquiry-based pedagogy on students learning within social justice education. The four participants echoed much of the literature on such pedagogy, as they each discussed the significance that inquiry-based methods had on students’ learning. They each observed that within social justice education, one of the best methods to approach this topic is by investigating the questions and problems that can help students cultivate their knowledge and work towards the discovery of solutions to those problems.

In discussing methods of approaching social justice education, Riana discussed her Socratic method of teaching within her urban classroom. When asked to explain what she meant by that, she said that she strongly believes in using inquiry and discussion within the classroom as an engaging and effective approach to having students think critically, while asking questions, and elucidating ideas revolved around equity and justice. She strongly believes that the most effective way to teach is not to stand and lecture her students; rather, it is to discuss what is right and wrong, and to explore how things should be. For her, teaching is not about providing her students with all the information on a specific topic, but rather having the students probe topics to come to their own conclusions. She trusts that the best way to incorporate social justice practices into the classroom is not by giving the students information directly, but by providing them with a succession of questions and problems that will have them thinking critically and analytically.
Social justice education in my classroom really looks like – it's a participatory thing, you know? It's reciprocal. I try not to stand and teach just, you know, top-down. I definitely try – you're going to see a lot of student engagement, a lot of student participation. I try to use the – I believe they call it the Socratic method, you know, of teaching, and I find that that has given me the best success as far as results. And so really, you're going to find a lot of dialogue, conversations, and discussions. I'm back and forth, you know? That really contributes to a deepening understanding of social justice. (Riana).

Corrine also touches on the use of discussions, problem solving, and exploring within social justice educational practices. As a result of having young students (grade six), Corrine mentions that much of the inquiry-based learning within her classroom is centered on collaborative inquiry. Collaborative inquiry involves students coming together to research and build skills and habits of mind that are essential to their learning. Corrine stresses that thinking critically and grappling with complex concepts within social justice education can be very difficult to do with the younger grades. As a result, Corrine encourages her students to work collaboratively and feed off of each other’s ideas and knowledge to assist each other in their own individual learning.

Both Leila and Kasey argue that we live in a time where society is so complex and so diverse that we cannot rely on traditional ways of teaching within our classrooms. The conventional methods of teaching our student basic skills are just not sufficient enough if really we want to work towards social change within our societies. Leila says that as educators, “we need to assist our students to exploring and ask questions that go beyond the texts they read in the classroom.” Kasey adds that, “inquiry learning is so effective and so needed if we want our students to be social justice leaders. We need to ensure that our students are viewing themselves as learners in the process of learning.”
As the facilitator in the classroom, educators should encourage students to raise questions and propose explanations. For Leila and Kasey, they strongly recommend that teachers looking to incorporate social justice education into their classroom need to encourage students to become critical thinkers by reassuring students to ask questions and seek truth and knowledge through their learning.

While all the participants in the study acknowledge that implementing inquiry-based learning is a multifaceted process, they each strongly agree with the literature on inquiry pedagogy, indicating that the promotion of this type of learning is highly effective and engaging within the classroom. Providing students with the opportunity to question, evaluate, and reinterpret information will only profit their learning of social justice education and provide them with the skills and knowledge to question typically accepted truism and, ultimately, become agents of social change within their communities, and the world at large.

**Factors Influencing Social Justice Education**

Students’ learning and understanding are major factors that influence the use of social justice education within the classroom. In this section of the research study, the participants’ insights into the ways in which social justice teaching has influenced the students’ learning and understandings will be discussed and analyzed. Each of the four participants in this study provided their perspectives on how the incorporation of social justice education in the urban classroom has heightened and benefitted the learning that transpires within their environments. These discussions allow the teachers in the study to present how teaching for social justice has advanced the overall learning and understanding of their students.
Student Learning and Understanding

When asked whether or not the incorporation of social justice education in the classroom has benefited the students’ learning and understanding, Leila says, “Absolutely, absolutely! I mean, the board, businesses and many occupations are demanding the need for critical thinkers in today’s society. With the pedagogy we’re instilling, we are cultivating our students to become critical thinkers.” With the incorporation of social justice pedagogy, Leila believes that her students have a much broader range of understandings pertaining to “life and thinking, and everything.” She adds that the incorporation of social justice education really helps students understand their roles in the community and the world. She says that students are exposed to so much; “they’re very aware of the world, much more so than when [she] was young, for example, because of TV, and the Internet. And that stuff can either make them really frightened or simple desensitized to issues.” As educators, when we take the material, knowledge, and issues that students are exposed to and work with them to understand and critically analyze this information, we can make a major difference in the students’ learning and understandings.

Riana mentions that when educators create lessons that are inventive, engaging, student-centered, and culturally relevant, it is inevitable that student learning and understanding will transpire. She says:

Social justice education most definitely boosts student learning and understanding. How could it not really? If these are a group of students who have had or have been exposed to social justice issues, like anyone else their entire lives, and you are as a teacher coming in and teaching them about those very issues and systemic problems and then
acknowledge it, and acknowledging their experiences, and putting a name
to it, how could it not, you know? (Riana).

Riana stresses that although it may not quantify at a higher-grade level, learning is
evident, as the students’ understandings translate through the deep and critical
conversations we are having in class. Similar to Leila, Riana makes the connection of
student learning and understanding to students’ acknowledgment of their roles within the
community. She says that her students’ understandings of social justice really helps the
students to make connections and look at “issues affecting different people from different
parts of the world, and how they really all come back to a local level.” Social justice
education promotes and furthers student learning and understanding; as such, pedagogy
really helps students to think critically and interpret the world they live in.

For Corinne, she confirmed the same sentiment as the other three participants, in
that social justice education plays a major factor in the learning and understanding of the
students. She says that such pedagogy, “makes students into citizens of the world and
provides them with the knowledge that will help them become globally conscious.”
Through their learning, Corinne says she has seen students take what is done in class and
really start to investigate and see whatever it is that they can do to make a difference.
Social justice pedagogy really has a positive impact on students’ learning. According to
Corrine, over the years of infusing such pedagogy, she has been able to witness students’
increased interests, knowledge, and skills within their learning. She says that educators
must recognize that students care about these issues that we are bringing into the
classroom, and that some are even experiencing it in their lives at that moment. As a
result, “of course they’re going to be interested, engaged and most importantly…
Lastly, of the four participants, Kasey was the most enthusiastic about the impact of social justice education in the learning of her students. She says that through the implementation of social justice teaching, educators are connecting students to the world. Students are sponges, and through such pedagogy they are developing understandings of themselves, of their peers, and of society. Kasey believes that social justice teaching provides students with a type of learning that is on a different scale from traditional classroom-based approaches. She says that through such education, “we are helping our students become globally conscious and aware.” When students apply what they learn to their everyday realities, Kasey says their understanding is evident and it is a great “affirmation of their learning.”

As educators, everything that we do and all the pedagogies we use are for the same ultimate goal: to foster student learning and understanding. If students are coming out of our classroom having learned nothing, we have failed at our definitive objective as teachers. It is our responsibility to find methods of ensuring that our students are engaged in the materials we bring to the classroom, and that they are effective in the students’ learning process. Based on the responses of the four participants in this study, they have all agreed that the use of social justice education within the classroom has proven to be an applicable and successful method of instruction that fosters and stimulates student learning. Classrooms serve as communities of learning, and each participant in the research study would agree that social justice education immensely complements the classroom culture of learning.
**Challenges and Teacher Recommendations**

This section of the research data highlights a number of challenges that teachers may encounter when trying to translate their social justice conceptions into practice. Each of the participants emphasized numerous barriers that they have faced when trying to incorporate social justice education into the classroom. The following portion of this research study will examine the most common barrier considered amongst the four participants: the difficulties and struggles associated with deconstructing students’ biases and prejudicial views.

Following that, in order to assist teachers who want to incorporate social justice practices into their instructional strategies, the four participants from the research study provided recommendations that educators can use to aid them in their initiatives. Each of the participants talked about seeking knowledge and support from experts. This could take the form of courses, professional development opportunities, and seeking assistance from people within the community. In addition, each of the participants in the study stressed the fact that teaching for social justice was a process, and that patience and motivation would be the winning characteristics needed for any teacher looking to incorporate social justice education into their urban classroom.

**Challenges**

*Deconstructing students’ biases and prejudicial views*

Like all teachers, each of the participants stressed the challenges of never having enough time or resources to do everything it is that they sought to do within their classrooms. However, a key challenge that each participant emphasized with regards to the incorporation of social justice issues into their pedagogical practices was the issue of
having to deconstruct the biases and prejudicial views that their students come into the classroom with. Riana deliberated on her challenges of having to work through students’ strong religious convictions in order to help them begin to look at things from different perspectives. For her, a main challenge she frequently faces is religion and religious ideology, religious beliefs, and especially practices. She explained her struggle by saying:

If equality is the message that I’m trying to get across, and the religion fundamentally is in denial of certain people's rights, it makes it a very challenging thing to negate, or even debate, you know, as a class, or have a discussion – because it's you versus the word of God, you know? And so it's even – sometimes it makes it very difficult to even touch because you, yourself don't want to entangle yourself in any kind of a – in a religious debate with students. So it's extremely challenging. (Riana).

When this happens, Riana says that she tries to help her students understand what equality really is, and she works with them to help them comprehend that equality is not something that is based on the denial of others, but rather it is a state of being equal regardless of what we do, wear, practice, or believe. Kasey adds that as educators who are prepared to bring social justice issues into the classroom, “we must remember that some students will have strong opinions that are a reflection of either their views or their families.” Teaching students who are closed off can be the such a challenging thing to deal with; however, as educators dedicated to such critical pedagogy, this is probably the most major challenge and biggest barrier that we are forced to deal with in the name of diversity, equity, and social justice.
Recommendations

Seeking Knowledge and Support

Addressing social justice issues in the classroom requires teachers to support students to think critically and analytically. Each of the four participants encouraged teachers to seek knowledge and support on how to go about instilling these skills in students. They encouraged educators to take additional courses, and to participate in professional development opportunities – anything that will enhance their efforts of teaching for social justice. Kasey talks about using other teachers as a resource. It is fundamental to build relationships with other teachers when working to incorporate social justice education into your teaching practice: “you need to be able to work in an environment where teachers are supportive of one another’s efforts and helpful and resourceful to each other.” Kasey recommends that all teachers, regardless of the amount of experience they have, “should always be sponges and try to soak in information and knowledge from everything and everyone around [them].” She encourages educators to never stop being students, and to continuously seek knowledge that will allow them to grow and become even better educators. As educators, we must remember that social justice learning is not achieved in one day. Riana emphasizes, “classroom experience is essential to figuring out how social justice education really looks like for your specific classroom community.” Mastery takes time, and patience is key when working towards becoming a teacher of social justice education.

Self-Advocacy

Teaching for social justice entails individuals being passionate and dedicated to diversity and equity. Sometimes your actions may not be accepted or acknowledged as
you work towards challenging the status quo; however, that should never discourage you from promoting your philosophy of education and the principles and convictions that you hold true to yourself. Leila encourages all educators dedicated to social justice education to become advocates for themselves, and to advocate for the education of their students. She says that talking about social justice issues means we are often dealing with touchy and controversial topics, and as a result, many teachers tend to shy away from this type of pedagogy, as they fear the backlash of their colleagues, the administration, and sometimes even their communities. As a result, you must “always be vocal about your dedication to such teaching.” Leila talks about the fact that she has had to advocate for her pedagogy on numerous occasions, as parents sometimes felt uncomfortable with their children being exposed to certain issues. However, she says that if your pedagogy is going to benefit your students and benefit their learning, you must advocate for your rights and the right to immerse your students in such critical pedagogy. A major element of being a social justice educator, and of being someone who simply believes in the concept of social justice and the principles of equity, diversity, and justice, lies in developing self-advocacy skills. This is an essential and fundamental element to standing up for what is right. Individuals dedicated to such causes must be willing to speak up for themselves and the things that are most important to them. Through self-advocacy, educators dedicated to social justice education will be empowered to speak up for themselves and make decisions that will benefit and further their students’ learning.

**Chapter Overview**

Working with educators who incorporate social justice education into their teaching practice was an insightful and inspiring experience. Through my four interviews with the participants, I was able to extract strategies and approaches for incorporating
social justice education into the classroom by inquiring into the unique and different perspectives of the interviewees. While each individual gave different perceptions into their methods of thinking and teaching, the participants had very similar views of social justice issues and concepts, and they held strong beliefs about how social justice could be incorporated in the classroom, and how essential this method is to both their teaching and the students’ learning. Based on my findings, educators seeking to incorporate social justice pedagogy into their classroom must acknowledge the following: the experiences that informed their social justice understandings; how they personally understand and conceptualize social justice; the role they play as a teacher in social justice education; the best pedagogical practices for implement such teachings in the classroom; factors that influence social justice education; and the challenges for incorporating such pedagogy in the classroom. The awareness and proficiency of the participants in social justice education has greatly increased my understandings of both my research study, as well as of my role as a future teacher of social justice.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Social justice education implementation from current practitioners was researched over the past two years. The previous chapter summarized the theoretical foundations of incorporating social justice education in urban educators’ pedagogical practices. Through an examination of the data collected, I have developed a more complete understanding of the ways in which educators incorporate social justice education into their classroom practices. This chapter is largely a reflection of the overall research process, the connections of the study’s findings to the literature, and the professional implications for my practices and that of other educators who teach for social justice. This chapter will discuss the implications of incorporating social justice educational practices in the classroom through the analysis of data gathered from the study’s four interviewees concerning the benefits of a social justice integrated pedagogy, and the reception of such practices, as experienced by the research participants. This chapter will also outline the limitations within the study, as well as make recommendations for further study, which may aid in the implementation of social justice education in urban classrooms for the purpose of equity, diversity, and global consciousness.

Relation to the Literature Review

The literature review for this research study was carried out to provide information relating to the general background and context of social justice education in classrooms. From the literature review, information was collected about the meaning of social justice education and the significance of teaching for social justice; the
development and need of social justice education in the classroom; and the existing recommendations of teaching for social justice in the classroom setting. Upon review of the literature and the data gathered for this study, there is a significant parallel between the themes that emerged in the data collected through the four interviews with practicing teachers and those that were identified in the literature review. Both the research and the literature review pointed to several key themes surrounding the objectives and implications of the dogmas of social justice education.

Interpreting and Conceptualizing Social Justice/ Education

Social justice is something we hear about all the time; however, we rarely – if ever – hear a clear, concise definition. The current research supports findings from the literature, which suggests that defining social justice is an objective that evades easy definition; nevertheless, several theorists and academics have provided insight into their interpretations and conceptualizations. However, is it simple enough to take that at face value and accept their definitions for ourselves? I would disagree. The concept of social justice, like many other philosophical concepts, is difficult to define precisely. Philosophical concepts involve making sense of things, interpreting them within the lives and communities we live in, and basing that on our views of how we look at the world. As a result, concepts like social justice become definitionally complex when people with different views and experiences attempt to define it. Each participant in the study echoed the literature on social justice, stating that there is no one conclusive and appropriate definition of social justice. Both the interviewees and the literature call for educators and students to create definitions of social justice that are individually constructed and that are given meaning based on the lived experiences and interactions of the individual.
Educators and learners come from diverse backgrounds that largely influence their understandings and their justification of how they define social justice. The interviewees and the literature both call for social justice comprehension that is wide-ranging and diverse, but that still allows for teachers and students to consider each other’s views in light of their own personal understandings. Everyone has different experiences and unique backgrounds, and what seems fair to one person might not be to another. As a result, we must be accepting of individuals with differing perspectives.

Coming into this research, I think I had a very broad and generic understanding about what social justice really was. I was really interested in learning what the literature and the research participants had to say in terms of providing a definition. I was determined to find a clear definition of social justice to assist me in putting my beliefs of social justice into perspective. However, much of the information I received agreed that social justice was a term that could not be given one cogent definition. Thinking about the literature and my participants’ views, I was not able to accept this lack of a well-defined definition. How was I doing an entire research study on something that did not have a clear definition? As I read, analyzed, and interpreted all of the research, I came to learn that the understanding, significance, and meaning of the concept of social justice really does not sanction a simple dictionary-based declaration to justify what it truly is.

At the beginning of this research study, I used a quote from a man whose social justice actions spoke louder than any definition I was provided throughout the research. Social justice advocate, Nelson Mandela, as well as the educators I interviewed for this study, really exposed me to the fact that the power of action in social justice truthfully is the best way to define the concept. I have learned that social justice is not about who can
talk the talk and provide a paramount definition. Rather, it is about who can walk the walk in social justice practices. Anyone can sit and talk about what social justice is, but the only way to truly define it is through the actions that are used to really demonstrate what it is. From my participants, I interpreted their students’ learning as being the action that truly justifies what social justice and, specifically, social justice education was to them. For myself, I have learned that social justice is not defined so much by the words used to define it, as it is through the actions that individuals contribute and execute for the sake of justice. At the beginning of this research study, I truly believed that in order to participate in social justice practices, I had to initially define what it meant. However, I now deem that the best way to define such a concept is through the actions you habit to embody it. I have learned that social justice through action is truly the most authentic way to bring real meaning to any definition of the concept. As humans, I think we like to provide concrete meanings to ideas and theories, but I now presume and understand that concepts like social justice must move beyond simple definitions and into real actions.

The Role of the Instructor in Social Justice Education

Both the interviewees and the literature acknowledged the significance of the role of the instructor in social justice teaching. Bringing in controversial and “touchy” subjects when discussing social justice issues in the classroom can be difficult. Social and political issues evoke different emotions from people, and we should never expect anything less from the students within our classrooms. Social justice education entails bringing in sensitive and often complex topics into the learning environment. As teachers, this can be challenging when we have students who are not emotionally prepared to handle such issues, and when we have students with strong feelings and opinions about
these controversial issues. Such obstacles need to be handled through a constructive and sensitive manner, as such pedagogy is essential to and valuable within classrooms.

A major suggestion discussed in the literature and that was addressed in the research data from this study is the significance of bringing the teacher into the learning process. Like the learners, teachers have experienced and witnessed injustices in their lives and in the lives of those around them. As educators, we have views and beliefs, just like the learners, and it has been recommended that we bring who we are into the classroom to help inform their pedagogy. However, because educators greatly influence the classroom, they must consistently remember that what they say can have tremendous prominence in the lives of their students. Through my research, I have learned that it is imperative that as educators, we must be self-reflective and investigate our lives, views, and beliefs, and then understand the effect this can have on our teaching, as well as on our students’ learning. Both the research and the literature are in agreement in that the role of the educator in a social justice education classroom is imperative to realize because this will largely assist teachers in modeling learning and diversity in their classrooms. Analyzing our roles will benefit our teaching with the hope of expanding students’ knowledge and helping students to understand the importance of having personal viewpoints, while assisting our students to think flexibly and consider multiple perspectives.

**Implementing Social Justice Education in the Classroom**

Oftentimes, topics centered on social justice issues are avoided in the classroom for several different reasons. Educators often feel as though they are not qualified or knowledgeable enough to discuss issues centered on race, region, gender, sex, and other
areas pertaining to social justice issues. Such fears are the very reason why I felt it was important to undertake this research in the first place. As a teacher candidate, I recognized that social justice education was both a powerful and meaningful way to really get students involved in their learning, and it can help students to learn to think critically and analytically about issues that are happening both locally, as well as globally. It all sounded amazing, but I struggled with how to go about incorporating such pedagogy into the classroom. Both the research and the literature mention that it is important that educators who are nervous but interested in social justice education become familiar with the content before incorporating it into their classrooms. I agree that this is an essential aspect of social justice pedagogy. We cannot bring such sensitive and, often controversial, issues and topics into the classroom without truly studying them beforehand. The data collected in this study recognize that although we may not be specialists on the issues, educating ourselves on these topics can allow us to have meaningful and insightful discussions on social justice issues with our students in an informative and effective manner. Although the research for this study was conducted with the help of confident social justice educators who each hold several years of experience with engaging in such pedagogy in their practice, I recognize that coming to this point of capability was essentially a process, and that becoming a teacher of social justice does not happen overnight. It sincerely does take a lot of hard work, dedication, and time to gain the conviction to teach for social justice in an effective and engaging manner.

Another trepidation I had when thinking about incorporating social justice pedagogy in the classroom was how I was going to handle the classroom environment
when contentious issues would potentially lead to frenzied and unpredictable situations. I believe that it is common for teachers to be hesitant of incorporating social justice education in the classroom because they may feel as though bringing in controversial and sensitive topics will cause the classroom to become chaotic and volatile. All four interviewees recognize the great importance of establishing a classroom environment when implementing social justice education in the classroom. I have understood that if we want our students to look at concepts through multiple lenses, to avoid generalizations, and to be rather critical of issues, we must first ensure that we are providing students with a space where they can be open to voicing their thoughts and opinions. Social justice educators need to ensure that they create an environment where everyone is cognizant of each other’s views and is respectful, regardless of whether they agree or not with their peers. Both the research and the literature reference the importance of establishing a safe classroom environment, where students can have conversations that are uncomfortable and are oftentimes heated, but where students can remain unswervingly deferential and courteous of each other’s beliefs and perspectives. I have recognized that it is important that students understand that there is a clear line between attacking a viewpoint and attacking an individual, and social justice educators must inform students of the differences between the two. It is suggested that educators, alongside their students, create guidelines and rules for governing social justice-based pedagogy in the classroom. From this research, I have learned that for such education to be successful in the classroom, all participants must recognize and understand that social justice-infused classrooms must be environments where disagreement is not only welcomed, but encouraged. Such differences amongst the learners will lead to
understanding; however, educators must ensure that individuals in the classroom do not feel attacked. Rather, students must feel as though their individuality is respected and that they are seen as contributors to the classroom community of diverse learners with diverse perspectives.

**Inquiry-Based Learning**

A common theme that emerged amongst the research participants was the use of inquiry-based learning in social justice education. The literature defines inquiry-based learning as a student-centered approach to learning that engages students in an investigation of real world questions based in a broad framework. Within the context of social justice education, the research agreed with the literature in that inquiry-based learning plays a prominent role in social justice pedagogy. Both the research and the literature harmonizes that such learning methods are highly valuable for the learners because it permits valuable critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis. There was no major differentiation with regards to the significance of inquiry-based learning, and I believe that the reason for this may be centered on trying to steer away from traditional classrooms where teachers transmit information to the students and learning is achieved through memorizing. Though it may not necessarily be a great approach for everyone, I truly agree that such an instructional method holds great learning value for students. Based on my own experience as a teacher candidate, I believe that inquiry-based teaching is an excellent student-centered and teacher guided pedagogical approach that truthfully engages students in the investigation of real world questions, all of which work exceptionally well within the framework of social justice education.
Based on this approach to learning, both the research and the literature agree that inquiry-based approaches enhance learning for the students and they best help to engage students in the overall learning process. The research indicates that social justice education often involves having to grapple with complicated and complex terms. Having students tackle these concepts through problem solving and questioning will benefit the learners, and they will also engage the students in the tasks in a much more meaningful way. Kasey, a participant in my study, said that education has turned a new leaf and “it simply isn’t sufficient to have students’ memorize and repeat information.” She says that we need to encourage our students to investigate information, find it, question it, critically examine it, and bring it to use. Based on my own experiences, as well as based on the knowledge attained from this study, I have affirmed that inquiry-based teaching indeed has the power to increase student engagement and foster deep critical thinking and understanding in our students. Such pedagogy has been shown to be constructive, as it allows students to adopt a type of learning that promotes the construction of knowledge, with the goal of assisting students to shape, assess, and reflect on their learning and understanding.

**Culturally Relevant/Responsive Teaching**

One of the most prominent themes in the literature that was a constant recurring premise within the research was the call for the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in social justice educational practices. Educators are strongly encouraged to bring their students into the learning process by getting to know the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students within the classroom, and then by making the learning meaningful using the cultures of the students to drive the lessons and, ultimately, guide knowledge development. Educators are encouraged to remember that the environment in which we
A CASE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Teach should shape our teaching practices, and using culturally relevant pedagogy will enable students to relate course content to their own cultural contexts. Both the literature and the research agree that classrooms that infuse culturally relevant pedagogy assist in constructing a diverse community of learners, as well as a classroom environment that is advantageous to the learning of ethnically diverse populations. From this study, it is evident that the transformative effects that validating the backgrounds, cultures, values, and experiences of our students progressively extends to their interests and learning. Based on what I have learned, taking the initiative to really learn about our students, and then using that to reexamine our pedagogy to incorporate their identities into the classroom will really open up a space for real widespread, engaging, and effectual learning to transpire.

Implications

As indicated at the beginning of this research project, there were two purposes of this research: to demonstrate how educators can incorporate social justice education into their classroom, as well as to advise my professional practice, as I am an educator who aspires to teach for social justice. This research was completed to inform my professional practice as an urban Ontario educator by demonstrating the significance and advantages of social justice education, as perceived by successful and experienced educators who teach for social justice. The research emphasizes the key elements, as reiterated in the literature, regarding the incorporation of social justice education into the classroom. While highlighting the similarities between the findings in the literature and the responses of the four research participants, the experienced educators individually shaped curriculum also makes evident the individuality amongst the interviewees that feature
their separate pedagogical styles as well as the litheness when approaching social justice education.

Through the literature, as well as the research, I have discovered that the most common ways to incorporate social justice education into the educator’s pedagogy is through the use of both culturally relevant pedagogy and inquiry-based learning. All four interviewees used various forms of culturally relevant and inquiry-based practices in their classrooms. These methods included conducting inquiry-based investigations, engaging in problem solving, using case studies, and developing higher-order thinking questions, and applying them to transformative culturally relevant instruction, such as in creating culturally responsive student–teacher and student–student relationships, as well as incorporating the student’s identities into the learning and teaching process.

This study is an example of how educators can incorporate social justice-infused pedagogy into their classrooms with the hopes of creating a classroom space that is inspiring and devoted to social change. The incorporation of social justice issues into educators’ pedagogical practices is a useful approach to promoting a just society by teaching students to challenge injustices and value diversity, both within their societies, as well as globally. Through social justice education, the ways in which social injustices such as race, class, and gender manifest themselves and become apparent is investigated and examined for the purpose of understanding and trying to deconstruct why and how these injustices operate.

Ultimately, based on the literature and the research, it is evident that educators dedicated to teaching for social justice are highly devoted to preparing and assisting their students in gaining a sociocultural consciousness of social justice issues by providing
them with pedagogical practices that will ultimately encourage these individuals to become 21st century students for a global society.

**Recommendations**

Based on the results of this research study, the following are recommendations for educators that wish to incorporate social justice education into their pedagogical practices:

1. Remember that our pedagogy must be reflective of your desire to make a lasting difference in the lives of my students.

2. Ensure that our attitudes and ideas are reflective of our overall commitment to social justice and change through education.

3. Become familiar with the principles of social justice education and create an individualized definition of what social justice means to you, and what it means in the context of your classroom.

4. Create a classroom environment that is empowering and committed to social change by creating a supportive, safe, and dynamic environment for students that focuses on individual needs, modern relevance, and preparing students for a changing world.

5. Students come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, and it is the responsibility of the educator to create an eclectic classroom by ensuring these diverse voices are heard, acknowledged, and included in the learning.

6. Make sure that the pedagogy is grounded in the lives of your students. Use culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy to bring our students’ identities, backgrounds, and cultures to the learning process, and remember the importance
of using the students’ interests as a way of promoting learning.

7. Work with students by gauging their prior knowledge on social justice, and then work with them towards establishing higher levels of understanding.

8. Challenge students to think beyond their assumptions about the world and about others by exposing them to critical pedagogy that forces students to think outside the box.

9. Remember that it is the role of the teacher to facilitate the education process by stirring the minds of your students and letting their inquisitiveness take them into their learning.

10. As a teacher for social justice, never forget that all of the students are powerful and capable of achieving excellence.

**Limitations and Next Steps**

Though this research study is inconceivably valuable, this project is not without its limitations. Due to the time restrictions of this study, the number of participants and the number of literary sources examined were both limited to suit the timeframe of this project. Having interviewed four participants from three urban Ontario schools, this research project would have greatly benefited from more participants from a variety of other schools. Though the implications of having only female research participants is not entirely evident, this study could be expanded to include male perspectives, as well as the perspectives of more ethnically diverse participants.

The next step for this research study would be to directly observe educators and students in their actions in order to gain a more nuanced idea of what social justice educational practices look like in an everyday classroom. This study discussed the
incorporation of social justice education in the classroom in a very broad manner. Another area of study would be to examine how teachers incorporate social justice education in subject-specific courses to obtain a better understanding of how different teachers teaching the same course incorporate social justice education into their curriculum. Lastly, the experience of researching this topic and analyzing the collected results has major implications for me as an educator, as I wish to teach for social justice. In the future, this study can be furthered to examine a new educator’s growth in social justice education from his or her beginning years of teaching and onward. This would help future pre-service educators get a better sense of the process required to become an assertive teacher of social justice.

**Reflecting on The Research Process**

Coming into this research study, my entire philosophy of education was guided and motivated by my desire to make a lasting difference in the lives of my students. This research process has furthered my efforts to helping students become productive, efficient, and autonomous social justice trailblazers. Both the literature on social justice education and the perspectives of my research participants have provided me with extensive knowledge and perceptiveness that will assist me in my understandings of how to incorporate social justice pedagogy in the classroom. As a teacher candidate who felt insecure and inexperienced, the skills and expertise of my research participants have influenced me, and they have encouraged me to designate my role as an educator to empowering students and to incessantly stay committed to teaching issues of diversity, equity, and social change. Powerful teaching ultimately leads to powerful learning, and this study has truly illuminated the ways in which influential teachers are incorporating
social justice issues into their classrooms as a way of heightening and engaging the students in their learning.

**Conclusion**

Incorporating social justice education into an educator’s pedagogical practices is an essential component of teaching 21st century urban students. In order for learners to be conscious of the injustices prevalent in our societies and in our world, we must find ways to engage students to critically grapple with social justice pedagogy. Although social justice-infused classrooms are complex and are oftentimes difficult to initiate and introduce, I have learned that the benefits of social justice education greatly outweigh the challenges. Teachers are not automatically equipped with the prerequisites and training to teach for social justice; as a result, many teachers are discouraged to incorporate such pedagogy into their practice. Since educators play a major role in the socialization of students and are deeply responsible for helping students to become socially conscious, a great onus must be placed on educators to become familiar with the principles of social justice education. They must work towards incorporating such pedagogies into their classroom, and to ultimately foster principles and practices of equity, diversity, and social justice amongst our learners.
References


A CASE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Informed Consent
University of Toronto/OISE

Date: ______________

Dear ______________,

I am a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at University of Toronto currently enrolled as a Master’s in Teaching candidate. As part of the requirements for this program and my own personal research interests, I am studying the ways in which experienced educators teach for social justice by incorporate social justice issues into their pedagogical practices. This research project is intended to inform teachers working in diverse communities and to ultimately contribute to the study of social justice education and responsive teaching in the field of education. I believe that your level of experience and knowledge on the subject will provide invaluable insights into my topic.

The primary research gathered will be used for a major research paper that is designed to give teacher candidates an opportunity to explore educational topics using qualitative research techniques. My research supervisor, who is overlooking the process, is Dr. Patrick Finnessy at OISE.

The interview process will take 30 – 60 minutes and be recorded using a handheld audio recording device. There is potential for a follow-up interview that will take 15 – 30 minutes but it is not required. The interview may take place at any time or location that is convenient to you. All names and any other vulnerable information will remain confidential, only to be seen by my supervisor and myself. The contents of the interview(s) will be transcribed verbatim and used as part of this research paper with the possibility of publication. The contents may be discussed/used during informal class discussions, conferences, and/or journal articles. The raw data from the interview will be disposed of within 5 years of the interview date. You are free to decline answering any specific questions and may pull out of the interview at any time. You will be well informed about the topic and will not be subject to any risk or harm at any point during the process.

Sincerely,
Amal Absiye
Researcher: Amal Absiye

amal.absiye@mail.utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Amal Absiye and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

[ ] I wish to participate in the OISE/UT project as outlined above.

Participant’s name (printed): __________________________________________

Participant’s signature: __________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________
APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

SECTION 1: Background Information

1. What is your name and occupation?

2. What is your academic background?
   a. Which Universities have you attended?
   b. What did you major/minor/specialize in?

3. How long have you been teaching?

4. Have you always lived in the Toronto, Ontario?
   a. If not, where else have you lived?

5. Can you tell me about any pre-educational experiences that you may have had that have informed your understandings of social justice education (elementary/high school/university)?

SECTION 2: Personal & Conceptual Understanding of Social Justice

1. How do you define social justice?

2. From where did your conceptualization of social justice derive?

3. What do you think contributed to these understandings?
   a. Were there any key moments in your life that encouraged your understanding of social justice?
   b. Can you elaborate?

4. How does your understanding of social justice play out in your personal life?

SECTION 3: Incorporating Social Justice Issues in Educational Practice

Pre-Service Teacher Education Program:

1. Did your pre-service teacher education program address social justice issues in educational practice?

2. Did this program in any way influence your current teaching?
   a. Yes- How?
   b. No- can you elaborate?
Educational Practices:

1. How do you define social justice education/teaching for social justice?

2. What does “teachers as change agents” mean to you?

3. In your opinion, what is the relationship between social justice and student learning?
   a. How are they related?

4. How does your understanding of social justice play out in your teaching practice/classroom?

5. In your opinion, why is social justice education important?

6. What are some of the ways in which your educational practices regarding social justice are connected to your meaning of social justice?

7. What does social justice education/instruction look like in your classroom?

8. How do you develop social justice understandings with your students?

9. How do you account for your students’ backgrounds and identities in your teaching of social justice issues?

10. Are you able to create lessons that meet curriculum expectations while still effectively addressing social justice issues in your classrooms/teaching?
   a. Explain.
      i. What subjects do you teach with social justice content?

   b. If you are able to create such lessons, can you give me some examples of lessons you’ve taught?

11. What factors influence your abilities to create such lessons, or not to create, such lessons for your students?

12. What is the most challenging aspect of incorporating social justice education in the classroom?

13. What struggles have you encountered when translating your conceptions of social justice education into practice?
   a. How does that affect the student’s understandings of social justice?

14. Within your school, is there a support structure to aid you in your effort to teach for social justice?
15. In your opinion, does incorporating social justice issues into educational practices boost the learning and achievement of the students?

16. In your opinion, does the incorporation of social justice education helped students understand their role in the community and in the world? If so, How?

SECTION 4: Recommendations

1. Do you have any recommendations for educators who want to start incorporating social justice issues into their educational practice?
   a. What do you think needs to happen to assist these teachers in implementing social justice education into their teaching practices?

2. Do you have any additional comments?