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“I’m concerned about actually doing it”: The struggles of pre-service teachers becoming change agents

Ting Huang , Jing Zhou , Si Chen , & Emerson Barnett

Abstract: This paper reports the struggles of 24 pre-service teachers (PTs) while intentionally integrating anti-racist pedagogy in which they were trained in a secondary teacher education program. PTs participating in this study are from various disciplines (i.e. Science, Math, English and Social Studies). Our findings reveal a multitude of struggles that PTs face when designing and implementing social justice-oriented curricula at the middle school level. Specifically, PTs reflected on and wrestled with three major concerns: 1) PTs’ own identities of being White and/or new teachers when they engaged with diverse student groups; 2) parents’ misperception about Critical Race Theory; 3) a lack of support from leadership regarding social justice issues. Our research suggests that in order to be change agents, PTs need more support from teacher education programs on their teaching practice for the social justice issues in addition to theoretical training. We argue that university faculty, cooperative teachers, open-minded school leaders, and parents could all be involved in long-term efforts to reform schools so that we can improve education for all.

Keywords: *change agents, Critical Race Theory, diversity, pre-service teachers, social justice, struggles*

The Successful Middle School: This We Believe characteristics:

- Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse.

- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
- Every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.
- The school engages families as valued partners.

Middle school students are at the forefront of educational research because they are at a critical age of growing from childhood into adulthood (Kier & Johnson, 2021; Knowles & Brown, 2014). Moreover, students in middle school are still developing their worldviews, beliefs, and perspectives as they pursue disciplinary learning. Marked by rapidly evolving cognitive, emotional, and intelligent development, middle school is a powerful opportunity to engage young adolescents in understanding complex social justice issues (DeMink-Carthew, 2018). The success of middle school education profoundly impacts younger generations’ future and the future of our society. Hence, what is taught during the unique educational stages is crucial (Andrews et al., 2018).

As a heated topic in middle school education and a key component of the curriculum, social justice is important for educators, parents, and school leaders (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Bishop and Harrison (2021) described social justice as providing equitable learning opportunities for students, which is one of the critical attributes of successful middle school education. Social justice is both a component of middle-level curriculum in general and a component of social justice development among young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Consistent with Bishop and Harrison, previous middle school social justice education research also proposed that middle school teachers need to: (1) build awareness of the diversity of disempowerment that exists among groups of people, (2) demonstrate caring for

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students and recognition of power held by the dominant group, and (3) develop a commitment to critical reflections on ways in which we perpetuate oppression and actively working to change it as change agents (Crosby et al., 2018).

In addition, scholars have noted the importance of building more critical, justice, and equity-oriented practices in middle school classrooms for decades (Andrews et al., 2018; McDaniel et al., 2001). Middle school students need teachers who believe that *every* (emphasis added) student can be successful. Andrews et al. (2018) articulated that it is significant to consider social justice in middle school teaching and change the students from “all” to “every” because too many people interpreted “all” to mean “most,” “the majority,” or “all but those kids,” resulted with neglecting “those kids” varying from race and ethnicity to linguistic background, perceived level of ability, status in special education, or socioeconomic status (p. 7).

One of the essential goals of middle school teacher education programs is to train pre-service teachers who advocate social justice, build social-justice-oriented practices in classrooms and cultivate young adolescents who have social justice awareness (Andrews et al., 2018). Cochran-Smith and Fries (2005) claimed that in the United States, social justice became one of teacher education’s main motivating goals in the 1990s. Currently, social justice in teacher education is not just a recurring national concern (Huang & Shen, 2022) in the United States but is also expanding internationally (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). It is a commitment that teacher educators continue to battle with in terms of effectively preparing teachers for their challenging job in an increasingly global society with lasting inequities in educational performance.

Despite the increasing number of studies on social justice-themed teacher preparation programs (e.g., Schildts, 2015), few studies have explored the struggles of middle school PTs through their voices and perspectives. Learning more about the perceptions and experiences of the middle school PTs trained in social justice-framed teacher education programs is worthwhile because their success in implementing a social-justice curriculum influences future leaders’ worldviews, beliefs, and perspectives. Specifically, middle school PTs may meet challenges if working with students, parents, cooperative teachers, and school leaders while teaching social justice in school settings. For example, at the time of our study, there was a heated debate about whether schools should adopt CRT as a curriculum in Virginia (Peritz & Kasai, 2021). Additionally, the tensions between school leaders and

middle school PTs who advocate for racial learning at middle school levels) were also intensifying (DeMink-Carthew, 2018). As a result, some White parents resist introducing social justice concepts in middle school classrooms. Thus, it is essential to incorporate social justice components into the designing of courses in teacher-education programs to empower middle school PTs.

The middle school teacher education program in this study is a program that intentionally integrates social-justice-oriented components throughout programmatic courses and practical experiences. For example, the social studies preservice teachers, as our participants, incorporated topics related to societal wealth, equal access opportunities, and privilege distributions into their many subject-matter lesson planning. Concerning our study, social justice-oriented components describe the teacher education program’s stances and scholarly traditions that directly address the processes of oppression, privilege, and isms (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005). To put it another way, the teacher education program in our study offers a viewpoint on society as the result of historically ingrained, institutionally sanctioned inequality along socially manufactured group lines such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability.

The significance of exploring middle school PTs’ struggles in this study is three-folded: (1) Understanding how the current pipeline of predominantly White PTs took on their roles as change agents are essential; (2) Exploring teachers’ understanding of their middle school students’ parents during the current trend of banning CRT is significant; (3) Comprehending the complex relationships among leadership and PTs who are using reformed social justice curriculum is needed. The results of this study were expected to deepen our understanding of the struggles of middle school PTs.

This study

It is urgent to examine the perceptions of middle school PTs on designing and implementing social-justice-oriented curricula. This study, therefore, set out to address the following two research questions, which address the challenging and exploratory experiences of PTs in diverse contexts of middle school teaching:

1. What are the various disciplinary (Science, Math, English, and Social Studies) PTs’ understandings of their roles as change agents adopting social-justice-oriented teaching?

2. What are the most concerning struggles of middle school PTs when implementing social-justice-oriented curriculum?

Literature review

For several decades, scholars have emphasized the need for more critical, justice, and equity-oriented practices in teacher education (e.g., Andrews et al., 2018; Conklin & Hughes, 2016; Gay, 2013, 2018; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). We reviewed emerging studies related to the struggles of PTs in middle school education about social justice, teacher identities, parental attitudes, and leadership support to argue that limited studies have comprehensively investigated middle school PTs' experiences in being change agents who practice social justice from a multi-disciplinary lens.

On social justice

With the sociopolitical tensions around the globe and within the United States, the racial divide (i.e., the social distance between racial groups) is widening (Gay, 2018), and the implementation of social justice curriculum at the middle school level has become a debate and a tension (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Nojan, 2020). Various states in the U.S. recently passed bills to ban Critical Race Theory (CRT) in middle-level classrooms, conflicting with the social justice practices our teacher education program promotes. Some middle school teacher preparation programs have been considered to enhance equity by understanding current PTs' social justice beliefs, practices, and challenges (Gay, 2018). Social justice means the equitable distribution of learning opportunities (Huang et al., 2023; McDaniel et al., 2001). To pursue social justice at the middle school level, beliefs and practices must also shift toward dismantling the long-standing systems of racial and structural oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021).

A growing line of education research demonstrates the importance of training teachers to be change agents in teacher education programs (Gay, 2013, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2018). Being an agent of change is one of the most discussed topics in teacher education (Gay, 2018). Learning more about the perceptions and experiences of the middle school PTs trained in social justice-framed teacher education programs is

worthwhile because their success in implementing a social-justice curriculum influences future leaders' worldviews, beliefs, and perspectives.

Existing middle school researchers have explored their curriculum design roles (Trinter & Hughes, 2021) via researcher-practitioner partnership programs and found PTs experienced struggles throughout their social justice teaching design process. However, little is known about the recent political and social impact (e.g., banning Critical Race Theory) and how these sociopolitical events impacted middle school PTs' perceptions of incorporating social justice into curriculum design and teaching practices. Despite the increasing number of studies on social justice-themed teacher preparation programs (e.g., Schildts, 2015), few studies have explored the struggles of middle school PTs through their voices and perspectives.

On PTs' identities

Research has shown that PTs do not feel confident about implementing social-justice- curricula due to their lack of teaching experience (e.g., DeMink-Carthew, 2018). According to DeMink-Carthew (2018), preservice teachers worry that they need to understand every social justice issue deeply and fully. PTs who needed to be trained in critical pedagogy and CRT principles may approach teaching with cultural assumptions and biases (Berta-Avila, 2004; Sleeter, 2011). PTs in Chu's (2021) case studies created and developed their professional identities via a "third space" theory (p. 269) which allowed them to negotiate their statuses of being change agents while navigating the tensions in putting theory to practice in two settings (learning at the site of teacher education and doing teacher residency at a school site as a student teacher). Chu (2021) called for a more caring system to support PTs as change agents.

PTs in Han et al.'s (2015) study stated that they had never been exposed to social justice-related teaching topics. To tackle the issue, researchers suggested that instead of viewing themselves as "experts," preservice teachers could act as "co-inquirers" and create a classroom where they explore social justice issues alongside their students (e.g., DeMink-Carthew, 2018, p. 32). As PTs' content knowledge improves and the ability to self-reflect grows, they can better connect to students' experiences and cultivate their critical consciousness (Nojan, 2020). Another struggle that some PTs face is their lack of understanding of diverse student groups due

to their potential lack of exposure to diverse students' cultures and lives at home. In Christ and Sharma's study (2018), PTs expressed concerns about understanding their students' complex and unique identities. Similarly, PTs felt uncertain about how to choose curriculum texts that fully encompass their students' identities so that they can practice a social justice-oriented curriculum that students find relevant and meaningful (Christ & Sharma, 2018). In fact, it requires knowledge and experience to adapt and implement the curriculum in diverse classrooms (Monte-Sano et al., 2014). Despite the concerns, our PTs still believe that inclusion and respect for differences is a vital part of communicating with diverse students and addressing social justice issues (Bonner et al., 2018).

On parental concerns

Successful middle schools engage families as valued partners (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). The importance of engaging parents in social justice curriculum has been well established in the literature (e.g., Bofferding et al., 2016). Previous studies have shown the struggles of middle school PTs in engaging parents in the middle school curriculum, including but not limited to parents in poverty (Baily & Katradis, 2016; Bofferding et al., 2016; Hannon & O'Donnell, 2022). Literature has shown that PTs were concerned about addressing diversity topics in their classrooms because this might cause some friction among parents (e.g., Han et al., 2015). One of the reasons behind those concerns might be that PTs could lack emotional training in working with parents, especially parents of color (Hannon & O'Donnell, 2022).

Literature has also shown that PTs might hold unique views on the roles of parents in the social justice curriculum. In Han et al. (2015), two PTs wrote that teachers need to introduce social justice issues in case the parents do not, suggesting that it is the parents' responsibility to teach their children about social justice, but schools can pick up the slack if they do not. Similarly, PTs in Baily and Katradis (2016) study used excuses to avoid race and racism topics because such topics from classrooms could be known and misinterpreted by parents. On the contrary, some PTs contend that it is the job of "EVERY" teacher to teach social justice to their students (Han et al., 2015, p. 643). With that being said, one primary goal of pre-service teacher training programs is to enhance PTs' confidence in parent support, which could impact PTs to be change agents in adopting a social justice-oriented curriculum (Baily & Katradis, 2016).

Overall, this points to the need to explore current PTs' perceptions of parents under the ever-changing sociopolitical tensions so that as middle school educators we can better support our middle school students in their communities.

On leadership support

Research in the recent decade has revealed the importance of leadership support (Bartlett, 2004; Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Kier & Johnson, 2021; Tran & Dou, 2019) in implementing a social justice curriculum. Bishop and Harrison (2021) suggested that school principals should be responsible for making schools equitable and just places. An increasing volume of research explores how school leadership impacted PTs practicing social justice-oriented curricula (e.g., Kier & Johnson, 2021). It has been well established in the field that administrative support, including providing opportunities for mentorship for PTs during their student teaching (Kier & Johnson, 2021), implementing effective professional development (Tran & Dou, 2019), and fostering a collaborative school environment is crucial for PTs (Tran & Dou, 2019). Leadership also plays a crucial role in teacher retention, and the success of leadership can empower PTs to become change agents (Firestone & Wilson, 1989; Lane et al., 2003; Tran & Dou, 2019). For example, Lane et al. (2003) study showed that when school administration matches PTs who are motivated to be change agents with in-service teachers who are having a hard time, both parties benefit and are empowered to become change agents (Lane et al., 2003). Besides its positive impact on PTs, it has also been found that a supportive school administration positively affects student achievement at both the elementary and secondary levels (e.g., Firestone & Wilson, 1989). Despite the abundant research on the role of leadership support in school contexts, there is a lack of studies specifically addressing perceptions of leadership support while implementing a social justice curriculum.

Limited research is available on multiple disciplinary middle PTs engagement with social justice curriculum while combating inequalities in education as change agents. Middle school researchers have explored STEM education (Kier & Johnson, 2021), English (Navarro, 2018), Math (Kokka, 2019), Social Studies (Nojan, 2020), Ethnic Studies (e.g., Nojan, 2020), and the challenges of implementing social justice understanding (Kier & Johnson, 2021). Yet, we do not have much current research exploring the general social justice practices from multiple disciplinary PTs (Science, Math, English, and Social Studies).

Theoretical framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014, 2021; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, 2016) is an international theory that challenges the legal systems which have normalized and engendered new forms of racism since the colonial era. It is a cross-disciplinary investigation into how social perceptions of race and ethnicity shape laws, education systems, socio-political movements, and media. CRT has made its way into systems of American K-12 education and in other Western countries to reveal and challenge racial oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, 2016). CRT highlights how particular cultures experience rejection within the oppressive systems of higher education and how important it is for marginalized groups to offer “counter” stories to universally accepted narratives about them (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Counter stories (Huang, et al., 2023) had an integrative role in our study because our goal was to reveal the struggles of middle school PTs as they became change agents and attempted to dismantle race and racism in their classrooms and the wider community.

In 2022, CRT was a contentious debate. Implementing a CRT-oriented curriculum includes building awareness for students at the middle school level to comprehend how American racism has influenced public policy. In the spring of 2022, the issue gained enormous attention in the media, particularly in K-12 education, where many state legislators are contemplating legislation that would outlaw its use in the classroom.

In reality, many schools are centering anti-racist pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching (Huang & Grant, 2023; Huang et al., 2023) but not taking CRT as an actual curriculum. Focusing on anti-racist pedagogy as a component of social justice work entails assisting students in critical self-reflection about how they were assimilated into this web of unequal relationships and its ramifications, analysis of the mechanisms of opposition, and the capacity to challenge these hierarchies.

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Even though CRT has reemerged as a heated debate in news and legislation, many middle school educators consider a social-justice-oriented curriculum is a useful lens that inspires how secondary educational practices can resist racism in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 2021; Nojan, 2020; Stovall, 2006; Trinter & Hughes, 2021). CRT is an educational theory focusing on critical revealing. It reveals the complexity of systems and the oppressive nature of education. Social-justice-oriented curriculum, in contrast, focuses on students and offers every student opportunity to succeed in diversity.

Method

Research context

In our research site, the teacher education program provided a new faculty-made social justice framework for all secondary PTs. The elements of this social justice framework include being an inquirer, a responsive instructor, a collaborator, a leader, and a change agent. The teacher education program was social-justice-themed because all its courses had themes from the social justice framework that faculty designed based on “Social Justice Standards: The Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework” from Learning for Justice (Teaching Tolerance, 2020).

Participants

Participants were drawn from a public university’s pre-service teaching program in Virginia. All 24 participants attended this social-justice-themed teacher preparation program and are practicing teaching at the 6–12 level. Even though not all of them are student-teaching in a middle school (some of them teaching at high school), the discussion in the paper draws from our thinking on teaching at the middle school level because all the 24 participants are prepared to teach at the middle school level.

Twenty-two of the PTs are White. One of the PTs self-identifies as Black (During the interview, he shared about his multi-racial identities). One of the PTs is Asian American. In addition, the majority of the PTs are female; one PT is male, two PTs self-identify as being LGBTQ with regard to gender identity.

Research design

This study is part of a larger two-year qualitative project exploring middle school PTs' perspectives in social justice teaching in the state of Virginia. We adopted virtual ethnography (Huang, 2022), which refers to a qualitative method that uses online formats in conducting ethnographical research (Hine, 2000). A distinctive aspect of a virtual ethnography is the researcher's physical position. A virtual ethnography field must be attended, much like a real-world field, but not in the same way. Instead of traveling to (remote) places and starting to observe the other, virtual ethnographers must develop a virtual identity and live in that community (Pearce, 2009). In this study, we conducted virtual middle school classroom observations in order to write field notes and conduct interviews; the goal is to be part of that community and see the interaction patterns in their community (Huang, 2022), hoping that somehow one is given access to hidden layers of culture throughout the virtual engagement. The main methods of this study were semi-structured Zoom interviews with 24 secondary PTs, informal conversations via e-mails, as well as online observations via the course management systems of Blackboard for their various course activities such as lesson plans, discussion forums, and reflections during their secondary teacher education process. Ting took field notes during and after the interviews and observations.

In addition, all the PTs have taken in-person classroom observations in a Social Justice Framed theory course, and documents were used to triangulate data resources to build research trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). The data collected were in the second semester of their teacher education program while the PTs were

observing teaching at their local placement schools. The teacher program is one full year, including the summer, fall, and spring semesters. The clinical teaching hours include PTs classroom observations in the Fall semester and independent student teaching in the Spring semester. We collected follow-up interviews with all 24 participants for their developed understanding of social-justice-oriented teaching as change agents. Our themes in this article were confirmed in the second round of interviews as member checking. The study design is presented in Table 1. Data collection was distributed over three semesters (Fall semester of 2021, Spring semester of 2022, and Summer semester of 2022).

Data sources

Ting Huang received university approval from the Institutional Review Board before conducting the project. Ting and Jing Zhou co-designed the research. All the participants consented to participate in the study before data collection. Ting conducted interviews with the participants to understand their learning experiences. During our interviews, we followed the basic steps of phenomenological interviews, including themes of PTs' experience contextualization, apprehending the phenomenon, and its clarification (Creswell, 2013). Our data sources include 24 interviews with each participant lasting from 40 minutes to one hour, 14 classroom observations, various documents (e.g., field notes, lesson plans, syllabus, reflections), online conversations, and other artifacts from observations and teaching materials. The whole research team worked together to analyze and interpret the data.

Table 1. Study design and data sources.

Data Types	Timeline	Notes
Interviews	Fall 2021 to May 2022	Interview lasts for 40 to 60 minutes. There were 24 interviews conducted in zoom.
Observations	Fall 2021	All observations were conducted both in person class and via Zoom recorded videos. Ting Huang and Jing Zhou engaged in coding, field note writing and document collections.
Documents	Fall 2021	Documents were in a variety of formats. For example, we asked our participants to bring their CRT documents to share their understanding. And these documents could be a foundation for demonstrating their understanding of social justices from their choice. One participant shared her social justice and culturally responsive teaching understanding from a document named "Social Justice Standards" (2020) from tolerance.org. https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/TT-Social-Justice-Standards-Anti-bias-frame-work-2020.pdf Another participant shared her lesson plan with "Social Justice Framework," from her Digital Humanities course.

Data analysis

In terms of data analysis, we followed the three steps of coding in grounded theory: open coding/initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding (Charmaz, 2014). In our initial coding processes, we used concepts from CRT in K-12 education, such as teacher identities, parents' engagement, and leadership (Ladson-Billings, 2014, 2021; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, 2016) as our sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) to find patterns and structures related to our teacher participants' struggles, visions, and contributions to teaching as change agents. Lastly, the team of researchers discussed and compared their coding processes for focused and axial coding. During the coding processes, we performed deductive and inductive coding by reading data and literature and writing the themes reported in this study.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research seeks trustworthiness and credibility (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Our study was trustworthy because we gave voices to participants of middle school PTs and honored their reflections on being change agents. Using multiple data sources (i.e., interviews, classroom observations, informal conversations, field notes, and documents), and multiple researchers' perspectives (the authors' team) to triangulate our analysis. We purposefully sampled participants from different disciplinary groups (Science, Math, English, and Social Studies), ages, and social classes to gain insight into PTs' diverse experiences,

Findings

Our study found that the great majority of our PTs from various disciplines (1) had limited confidence due to their identities as White people and new teachers, (2) had concerns about parents' attitudes due to parents' misperception about CRT, and (3) experienced a lack of support from leadership.

Being White and new teachers

We identified two struggles teachers had relating to their identity: (1) lacking prior experiences with racial and cultural diversity, which made them hesitant to advocate social-

justice-oriented curricula, and (2) being new in the teaching profession which made them feel not competent enough to become change agents (Interviews and field notes, 2021).

Most PTs declared their awareness and willingness to foster the respect for diversity among students, echoing the middle school literature (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). However, many of them lacked experience studying and working with marginalized students (Interviews and field notes, 2021). Some White PTs who did live and have experiences with diverse communities still felt that they were not confident in reforming a social justice-oriented curriculum which was only theoretically discussed in their teacher training program. They wished they had more practice implementing a social justice curriculum in classrooms with concrete examples of pedagogy, content (e.g., curriculum materials), and assessment.

Sarah worried that being a White female teacher, she may not be fully aware of students' culture. She said:

The fear of ignorance is definitely real. The fear of not knowing that I could be doing or saying something inappropriate because of my identity as a White woman from a middle-class background. I am trying to be really aware, like, have my listening ears on, checking in with the students about lessons, and about the texts that we're reading, and really getting their true opinions, and bringing the students' thoughts into the lesson planning as much as I can. I've definitely, especially in the last two years in the program, have been trying to learn more about those things. I mean, both for my sake and for the people around me, but I definitely had experiences where I have committed microaggressions just out of ignorance. (Interview, 2021)

This is evidence that Sarah was not confident in fully reforming her curriculum to address social justice issues due to being White and "lacking experience interacting with students whose identities differ" from her own (Field notes, 2021). She was worried about committing microaggressions and offending people "out of the blue" due to her ignorance (Field notes, 2021). Our observation field notes also captured Sarah discussing White privilege with other middle school PTs in her teacher education program classroom (Field notes, 2021). When Ting asked, "Given your White privilege, how would you go about being a change agent?" (Interview, 2021). Sarah replied she would show genuine care to everyone in the class. Sarah had a strong wish to be an active change agent and

curriculum reformer; however, her lesson plan in her capstone portfolio lacked specific examples of how she would be practicing “social justice” in concrete learning activities (Documents, 2022). Hence, her ways of practicing as a change agent needed more support in practice, as she revealed in her conversations with Ting.

Middle school PTs found that, in addition to lacking experiences similar to those of marginalized groups, being a novice teacher also made them less confident about being change agents, especially in the company of other experienced teachers.

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New teachers needed to gain practice in transforming abstract theories into concrete skills for the classroom. For example, Sophie is an English teacher of color and a second-generation Asian immigrant. Even though she identified herself as a racially marginalized person, she still felt that being new to the profession made her hesitant to advocate for changes. She expressed,

I think there’s maybe teaching methods or texts that don’t really relate with our kids. They feel outdated. Kids really lose that opportunity to draw authentic connections. For social justice, I know I’m afraid only if I’ll ever have to advocate for expanding the types of texts, because if I’m the new person, and like in a new team. It’s like the question of is it right for me to push a lot or should I just sit back. I think our teacher education provided a lot of great theory preparations. I wish there is more training on how to put theory into classroom practices. (Interview, 2021)

As an Asian American, Sophie felt strongly about implementing culturally responsive texts and authentic materials that “kids can relate [to]” because she thinks her current school placement is “teaching methods or texts that don’t really relate with our kids. They feel outdated.” The White middle class-based English curriculum does not reflect students of color’s home and family lives. However, Sophie asked, “is it right for me to push a lot, or should I just sit back” in regard to incorporating a more diverse and updated curriculum that students can relate to.

Being both an advocate for social justice curriculum and a new teacher is difficult. Many White middle school PTs expressed that they need to follow the rules, learn from experienced teachers, and understand the current curriculum (Baily & Katradis, 2016), while also advocating for appropriate curriculum changes regarding social justice. The other two PTs of color also felt unconfident due to being new in teaching regardless of them being strong advocates for a more social justice-oriented curriculum.

Parents’ misperception of Critical Race Theory

Relating to being new and inexperienced, many of our participants (Olive, Mary, Sophie, Sarah, Cici, Cathy, Angela, Mimi) were concerned about conflicting with White parents’ attitudes and beliefs regarding the implementation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) due to the current political environment. In 2021, Glen Youngkin, a Republican and an outspoken critic of CRT, was selected as the Governor of Virginia. After that, middle school PTs experienced tension between their hope to be change agents and being told by school leadership, such as school administrators and cooperative teachers, to be careful about engaging in critical race issues, such as social-emotional learning, which has become embedded in these debates even though it is different from CRT. One example is contributed by Olivia, a PT of Social Studies, who said:

My concerns really are regulations imposed by the education board, or our governor, or parent committees. There’s so much I want to do as a teacher that I believe is the right thing to do. But there are so many people who are against Critical Race Theory. And social emotional learning is an issue now for a lot of parents. The parents are against social emotional learning, even though it’s so good for their children. They still don’t want it because they call it a gateway to Critical Race Theory. (Interview, 2021)

This is evidence that Olivia is concerned about the various resistances to anti-racism pedagogy that she intended to adopt. These resistances include policies from the state governor, language from school administrators, and fear of parents’ misconceptions about their critical pedagogy. Ting followed up by asking her why social-emotional learning was an issue for these parents. She said that social-emotional learning (SEL) is a curriculum geared at helping students manage emotions, develop positive relationships and make good decisions, which has nothing to do with Critical Race Theory. But some White parents

Table 2. Participants in the study: Pseudonyms and background information.

Pseudonym	Subject	Personal Pron.	Race/Ethnicity
Cici	Science	She, Her	White
Macy	Science	She, Her	White
Echo	English	She, Her	White
Kath	Social Studies	She, Her	White
Olivia	Social Studies	She, Her	White
Angela	Science	She, Her	White
Sarah	Science	She, Her	White
Maddy	Math	She, Her	White
Emily	Social Studies	She, Her	White
Cathy	Math	She, Her	White
Mimi	Social Studies	They, Them	White
Katie	English	She, Her	White
Stephanie	English	She, Her	White
Audrey	Social Studies	She, Her	White
Steven	Social Studies	He, Him	Black
Melody	English	She, Her	White
Shay	English	She, Her	Asian
Camile	Science	She, Her	White
Ella	English	She, Her	White
Addison	English	She, Her	White
Naomi	Science	She, Her	White
Spencer	Social Studies	They, them	White
Sawyer	Math	He, Him	White
Jordan	Social Studies	He, Him	White

thought that developing positive relationships and making good decisions involved learning about race and racism (Field notes, 2021). Schools have worked to develop these SEL curricula for decades, many parents were sensitive and had misconceptions of CRT. She shared that she feared not following the rules or getting complaints from her parents. Our observation field notes also captured another two PTs, Mary and Melody (See Table 2) discussing parents' attitudes and beliefs in our informal discussions. Similar to Mary, many of our middle school PTs (i.e., Audrey, Mimi, Olive, Mary, Sophie, Sarah, Cici, Cathy, Angela, Melody) are concerned about ways of practicing change agents while discussing social justice issues in classrooms (Interviews and field notes, 2021). They needed more support in working with parents who did not support racial learning and CRT.

Several PTs (e.g., Olivia, Cici, Melody, Mary, Sophie, Mimi) shared that some parents who are against CRT might be over-sensitive and less open to anything related to changes and reformation, even if it is something totally unrelated to social justice and valuable for students. One English PT, Melody, said:

I'm more concerned about offending some parents in the things that I teach. So like if I'm teaching something specifically that addresses race, like the poems from the Harlem Renaissance, and then a student goes home and tells their parents that hey, this is what we read today. It's all about race, and then the parent thinks that I'm teaching Critical Race Theory. (Interview, 2021)

Melody's words illustrated that parents' active involvement and overly sensitivity could add pressure on new middle school PTs. Our study found that PTs were intimidated and concerned about parents' attitudes. Echoing Bofferding et al. (2016), our PTs, especially our social studies PTs, found challenges in engaging with parents surrounding the social justice curriculum.

A lack of support from leadership

Ten out of twenty-four of our participants (i.e., Steven, Mary, Olivia, Cathy, Melody, Sophie, Sarah, Cici, Audrey, and Maddy) expressed concerns about leadership support, which are mainly from two aspects: (1) the school administration's neglect to defend social justice by itself, and (2) the indifference to support middle school teachers' implementation of the social-justice-oriented curriculum. Some PTs shared that there was a lot of racism, homophobia, or other issues related to social justice in their schools. However, the school's administration did not stop those issues from happening (Interviews, 2021). Steven shared that,

This was probably a month ago now. A White student posted a TikTok with very racist language throughout the TikTok, using several racial slurs. And then the administration just did nothing to discipline the student. Their argument was that it didn't happen at school. They couldn't punish it, even though it had a lot of effects on the student population. Especially for students of color, just making it feel like an unsafe environment for them. So the school did nothing. (Interview, 2021)

Since the school administration neglected to take action to stop actions of racism in the school, it is not surprising that PTs' practice of social justice-oriented teaching might not be supported or even rejected. Another participant, Mary, shared her experiences regarding not receiving support from her cooperative teacher (Field notes, 2021). Mary had an assignment from her university faculty, which

was to design a “social justice-themed” lesson plan. Yet, when she implemented that in her student teaching in the site school, her cooperative teacher was against the idea and worried that, as a new teacher, teaching the social-justice-oriented content would be inappropriate and cause parent complaints. Mary was not alone. Olivia has a similar experience; she said:

I don’t know how much I will be allowed to teach. I have this plan that I believe is right, and as a teacher, I know they can benefit. But I’m afraid of people higher than me [cooperative teacher and school leaders] in their position, telling me, “no, you can’t do that. You can’t teach them that.” This is one of the fears. (Interview, 2021)

This is the evidence that Mary and Olivia needed to gain support from their cooperative teachers or school leaders (who were superior to them and adhered sophisticatedly to school policies and norms) in addressing social justice curriculum. Therefore, the attitude of collaborative teachers represents the attitude of the school leadership. When Ting followed up with middle school PTs about what their responses were to these resistances, ignorance, and neglect of social justice issues at school, Cathy expressed a struggle,

I’m concerned about actually doing it. I was just worried that I will ruffle too many feathers too quickly. And schools are very much or places of politics in terms of making change happen. I’ve never been that good at playing politics, because I am very blunt. And I’m very passionate about the things that I would be making points about, so my main fear is burning my bridges before I get to them. (Interview, 2021)

Cathy worried about “burning bridges” as she promoted social justice teaching. Due to their roles as PTs, many implementing social justice curricula required collaborations from a community of support: university faculty, cooperative teacher, school leaders, parents, and state-level policies. Racism in the structural power systems and schools made the school leadership unwilling to embody social-justice-curricula or support teachers who implement social justice. Worse, senior teachers who know better and so “play it safe” by following the school leadership’s policy would also not support our PTs.

Discussions

Existing middle school research calls for more middle school educators to be change agents because building awareness about the importance of social justice is not enough (Andrews et al., 2018; Bishop & Harrison, 2021). However, limited literature sheds light on middle school PTs’ struggles that impeded them from being change agents. Particularly, Lane et al. (2003) argued that both schools and students benefit when PTs are empowered to become change agents, suggesting that when middle school PTs’ identities, parental and leadership support align, then it is possible for every student to be successful. Next, we discuss how we contribute to scholarship in teacher identities, concerns of parents, and leadership support, with our data about PTs’ struggles.

On middle school PTs’ identities

According to researchers in teacher education (Han et al., 2015; Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013), PTs’ intersectional identities, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and experiences, impact their own perspectives of being change agents because PTs’ personal and contextual experiences affect their pedagogy and content knowledge. Middle school PTs in this study experienced struggles due to their identities, which echo Gay and Kirkland (2003) and other teacher education scholars (DeMink-Carthew, 2018; Irvine, 2010; LaDuke, 2009). First, our study indicated that White PTs struggled to connect and appreciate their varied students’ backgrounds and experiences. Building relationships with students is the most important factor in practicing social-justice-oriented culturally relevant pedagogy (Huang, Chen, et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Building relationships with students with different backgrounds than themselves is also the job responsibility of a middle school teacher. For example, Butler et al. (2014) indicated that teacher educators should prepare PTs in science education to teach students whose cultures differ. This is crucial in ensuring diverse students’ success and every student meeting the learning standards, including Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards. Second, our middle school PTs struggled because they were new teachers and lacked experience. The above two findings agreed with Bonner et al.’s study (2018), which found that preservice teachers struggle to connect with a diverse group of students, and with Christ and Sharma’s study (2018) revealed that PTs are new and lack experience of choosing texts for marginalized students.

This role as a teacher and student puts tremendous demands on middle school preservice teachers. Andrews et al. (2018) asked middle school educators to act as leaders, change agents, curriculum designers, and colleagues in integrating inclusive and equitable practices. Additionally, Bishop and Harrison (2021) suggested that responsive middle school educators should constructively use the curriculum to support students' awareness of their identities, meaning middle school PTs face multiple challenges and opportunities to understand identities. This well explains why it is important for teachers to gain experience in diverse identities. We agree with DeMink-Carthew (2018, p. 32) that PTs should act as "co-inquirers" with their students in classrooms and Chu (2021) about creating more negotiating and mutually informed spaces as "third spaces" between two settings of university campuses and student teaching school site. Middle school PTs must learn to create a classroom where they explore social justice issues alongside their students (DeMink-Carthew, 2018) to be more confident even though they lack life experiences and are new teachers. Teacher education programs must also equip middle school PTs with lesson planning and designing abilities and skills. We echo DeMink-Carthew's (2018) idea, which demonstrated how teacher education programs can engage middle school PTs in social justice education by designing an interdisciplinary social justice unit. Future research could also learn from Hagerman and Porath (2018), which showed how a personalized and learner-centered approach authentically led to the teaching of social justice in Rolling Hills Middle School. With support from teacher education programs, middle school PTs could not only gain more confidence in being new teachers but also put the diverse curriculum into practice.

On concerns of parents

The importance of parent engagement in middle school settings has been well-established in the literature (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Bofferding et al., 2016; Campbell & Valauri, 2019; Ramirez et al., 2016). The participants in this study also acknowledged the importance of parent engagement. However, promotions of diversity and social-justice-curricula may receive parent disapproval. The existing literature mainly centered on engaging parents of color (e.g. non-English-speaking Latino parents, see Ramirez et al., 2016) with specific subject-based events (e.g., match nights; see Campbell &

Valauri, 2019) while implementing a social-justice-oriented curriculum (Huang & Shen, 2022). Many of our middle school PTs (i.e., Olive, Mary, Sophie, Sarah, Cici, Cathy, Angela, and Mimi) were more strongly concerned about the reactions of White parents to their implementation of social justice-oriented curricula in the classroom. Unlike fear of the unresponsiveness of some parents who did not pay enough attention to kids' school experiences, our middle school PTs feared the opposite. They worried about the engaged White parents' attitudes toward teaching social justice-oriented curriculum in the classroom. Considering parents' important role in supporting a social-justice-oriented curriculum, we appeal that teacher education for PTs must begin to incorporate how to navigate parent attitudes regarding a social-justice-oriented curriculum. Expanding on Campbell and Valauri (2019), we argue that it is important to have conversations about race with parents of color and White parents. School leaders and teacher education programs should incorporate these components in middle school PTs' training.

On leadership support

Echoing literature on the importance of support by school leaders (Bartlett, 2004; Tran & Dou, 2019) and the importance of university-school partnership (Kier & Johnson, 2021), our study shows that middle school PTs perceive administrative support, including providing mentorship opportunities, encouraging community connection, and fostering a collaborative school environment as crucial factors in being change agents.

However, middle school PTs in this study feel the administration needs to support them and, therefore, cannot reap the benefits discussed in the literature regarding how administrative support helps PTs become agents of change. Despite leadership is a key component to school success (Tran & Dou, 2019), support from school leaders have been perceived to be insufficient by PTs in our middle school contexts. In addition, it is important but challenging to balance the relationship between parents and schools. It is recognizable that school leaders value parents' voices, but they should be aware that voices should come from all groups, not merely White parents. Furthermore, respect for the family engagement should not be based on the sacrifice of offering less support for teachers who implement social-justice-oriented curricula.

Overall, supportive school leadership has been shown to have beneficial effects on student achievement and teacher retention (Firestone & Wilson, 1989; Tran & Dou, 2019) and, with the right interventions, the school administration can empower pre-service and in-service teachers to become agents of change (Firestone & Wilson, 1989; Lane et al., 2003; Tran & Dou, 2019).

Implications

We offer three suggestions for middle school educators, practitioners, and administrators. First, middle school administrators and teachers should embed more practical elements of parent engagement in the teacher preparation curriculum. Middle school PTs may benefit from learning how to better engage with parents regarding social justice-oriented curricula. Second, we call for nurturing meaningful relationships between researchers and middle school practitioners to allow collaboration in supporting and educating middle school PTs' to engage with parents. Middle school leaders could be more open-minded and consider being a trusted bridge between teachers and parents. Third, we call for university faculty-practitioner collaboration to expand beyond local buildings and into communities. After all, truly teaching for social justice does not include a checklist or box to click. It is a way of being and doing. School leaders must be more open-minded and let PTs get their feet wet in curriculum reforms. This could include periodical nights, and weekends to engage parents in middle school students learning about social justice. In addition to that, training workshops could be organized to support middle school PTs' engagement with parents. In conclusion, middle schools should value their PTs as change agents to work toward a positive future so every student can be successful (Andrews et al., 2018).

Limitations

Overall, the study is not without limitations. First, the context of this study was in the middle of our PTs' second semester of their teacher training program. Hence, the reported struggles may change as they develop their professional identities. We will share our second round of interview analysis in a future study. Second, this study focused on understanding the struggles that PTs in middle school faced in becoming change agents (as part of the social justice framework used in the local teacher education program). However,

the findings based on the experiences of these 24 PTs are not representative of all PTs' perspectives at middle-level grades in a different state or context. Future studies can recruit PTs from different middle school grade levels and contexts to compare their struggles. Additionally, the study was conducted in online and in-person settings on a higher education campus. Thus, the study did not include PTs' school teaching observations. Future studies could observe how PTs teach social justice topics in classrooms and interview them after their teaching. Also, future studies can involve perspectives from their middle school students to further triangulate the data source.

Conclusion

Now that we have discussed the significance of addressing middle school PTs' struggles, we appeal to improve teacher preparation programs by supporting middle school PTs in their efforts in being change agents and to meet the diverse needs of all students. Our study shows the powerful and complicated relationships among teacher identities, parents, and school leadership (Willemse et al., 2018). Empowering PTs to be change agents depends on collective factors from related support systems: university faculty, school leaders, parents, and overall socio-political climates. We demonstrated that the PTs needed more supportive systems (including the parents and the school administrators), and this is consistent with literature stating teachers need the school administration to empower pre-service and in-service teachers to become agents of change (Firestone & Wilson, 1989; Lane et al., 2003; Tran & Dou, 2019). In conclusion, this study adds details and nuances to the existing discussion on middle school PTs being change agents and advocates for a supportive holistic system (such as the third space in Chu's, 2021 study) in which middle school pre-service teachers could be more confident and supported in their efforts to be change agents.

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