Negotiating Visions of Teaching:
Teaching Social Studies for Social Justice

Ruchi Agarwal, Ed.D.
San Francisco State University

(408) 375-4012
rarangnath@gmail.com

Pre-service teachers may leave their graduate programs with strong social justice leanings, yet most begin teaching struggling to integrate their visions into a context constrained by accountability demands. Pressures and constraints, such as high-stakes testing and mandated curriculum, may require teachers committed to social justice to negotiate what they want to teach and what they are able to teach. This piece highlights the daunting journey of one beginning teacher and her struggle to uphold her commitment to teach for social justice while still meeting administrative expectations. The study’s findings point to the myriad complexities surrounding teaching social studies for social justice, especially regarding integrating social justice content into the general curriculum. As a result of these findings, several questions have been formulated for further research surrounding the education of teachers for social justice.

Key Words: social studies, social justice, teacher education, learning to teach, curriculum, beginning teachers

Introduction

As an increasing number of teacher education programs work to emphasize social justice, equity, and diversity as central concerns in the professional preparation of teachers, graduates of these programs may enter their first classrooms seeing their “responsibility to reform, not just replicate, standard school practices” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 24). Thus, teachers may envision their work as part of a larger struggle to reduce social inequities in their classrooms and community (Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Lalas, 2007). In teaching for social justice, teachers may imagine enacting a social studies curriculum that challenges the status quo norms of historical knowledge (Au, 2009), integrates multiple perspectives, examines and questions sources of privilege and inequality, and supports social change. Incorporating social justice issues into social studies instruction is particularly important, as social studies is especially well suited to teaching about the oppressive tendencies and anti-oppressive possibilities of individuals, cultures, institutions, and histories (Wade, 2007). The purpose of this article is to delineate the challenges beginning teachers face in teaching social studies for social justice within an urban school context of standardization and accountability.

The Context of Schooling

Disparities among racial, cultural, and linguistic groups in school achievement continue to be matters of increased national importance, prompting concerns related to educational equity.
in U.S. public schools (Cochran-Smith, 2004). In our current political climate, those in favor of a standardized movement argue that mandated curriculum and widespread use of high-stakes testing achievement tests will bridge the achievement gap between students of color and their middle-class, white counterparts (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Sleeter 2005). In the attempt to hold all students to the same standards, advocates claim that accountability - collecting information from large-scale tests and using them for educators and school officials to “improve” performance and meet standards - will make the system more equitable, ending what the 2004-2008 Bush administration referred to as the “bigotry of low expectations” (Oakes & Lipton, 2007, p. 441).

While the strongest supporters of movements toward standardization claim that high-stakes testing, accountability, and mandated curriculum will make our public school system more equitable, many researchers and educators argue against such ideals, in that standardization, from their perspective, leads to homogenized and static curriculum unconcerned with the complexities of learning and the “diverse funds of knowledge” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 34) students bring to the classroom. Moreover, scholars argue that standardization serves to only narrow the curriculum, undermine teachers’ professional judgment, and impose a limited form of assessment, without recognizing and/or eliminating inequities in schools (Ayers, 2001; Lipman, 2007; Sleeter, 2005); ignoring “serious inadequacies and inequalities in resources, conditions, and capacity” (Oakes & Lipton, 2007, p. 441).

Although pre-service teachers may leave their graduate programs with strong social justice leanings, they also may enter the profession struggling to build, integrate, and enact justice-oriented social studies curriculum. Pressures and constraints, such as adhering to a mandated curriculum and preparing students for standardized tests, may be especially challenging for novices, requiring those committed to social justice to delicately balance what they want to teach with what they are able to teach. In this study, particular attention is paid to the ways in which beginning teachers translate their conceptions of social justice within a context of standardization and accountability.

The process of learning to teach for social justice is not an easy one, even for those already committed (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). Organizing curriculum can be an especially difficult task, often times requiring teachers to navigate mandated curricular structures to enact curriculum that integrates social justice content. There is substantial research documenting teachers learning to teach.

In a study of 50 first and second year credentialed teachers in Massachusetts, Kauffman and colleagues (2002) found that a standards-based and accountability environment served to create urgency in the teachers to raise test scores and cover everything (Sleeter, 2005). Essentially, the pressure to raise test scores dictated what was taught and not taught in the classrooms. The teachers commonly expressed the desire and need to move quickly from one topic to the next because they feared the text may cover a standard they had yet to address.

When examining three beginning teachers and their development of instruction in the first years of teaching. Dixie Massey (2004) found the teachers to be deeply overwhelmed by curricular expectations. Teachers dealt with curriculum in three ways: relying on mandated or suggested curricula; rejecting the curricula by attempting to integrate new ideas; and/or asking others to teach for them. None of the teachers adapted or reformed the mandated curriculum; rather, they either taught directly from the text or set aside the mandated curriculum to develop their own lessons.

Tracking the first-year experiences of Jim, a beginning white, middle-class teacher Elizabeth Bondy and Jim McKenzie (1999) found challenges such as a mandated curriculum to
hinder Jim in his efforts to teach for social justice in a black, urban poor elementary school. Jim was expected to adhere to the mandated school-wide reading program, Success for All (Bondy & McKenzie, 1999), requiring ability-grouping and 90 minutes of instruction each day. Jim felt forced by these restrictions to make constant negotiations between what he wanted to teach and what he was able to teach.

Teachers may find it difficult to translate their ideal into practice, uncertain of how to improvise curricular guidelines (Kelly & Brandes, 2001) and/or teach with integrity while pressured to raise test scores and follow a mandated curriculum (Sleeter, 2007). Some beginning teachers may attempt to uphold their commitments to teach for social justice by scrambling to add social justice content into a rigorous standardized curriculum (Schmidt, 2007) or finding a separate space in which to teach lessons with social justice content outside of the general curriculum. Others may leave their commitments behind, finding teaching for social justice to be too overwhelming (Agarwal, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to detail the complex, challenging, and uncertain journey beginning teachers face in enacting their vision of social justice-oriented social studies curriculum into an urban context of standardization and accountability. By studying how teachers’ social justice commitments are expressed in the classroom and the obstacles that hinder teachers’ from implementing more of these commitments, teacher educators may better prepare teachers to navigate the tensions between the ideals of teaching for social justice and classroom practice. This article explores the convergences and contradictions between what one teacher conceptualized as teaching social studies for social justice and what she was able to enact in her current school context.

The following research questions guides this study: (1) What are beginning teachers’ conceptions of social justice-oriented social studies curriculum? (2) Do beginning teachers incorporate social justice issues into their social studies curriculum, and if so, how? (3) What supports and/or hinders beginning teachers in their enactment of social justice-oriented social studies curricula within a context of standardization and accountability?

Teaching Social Studies for Social Justice

The data presented here are centered in an understanding of social justice as social reconstructionist. Advocates of this approach envision a social studies curriculum challenging students to examine, define, and work toward a “more humane society” (Sleeter & Grant, 2009, p. 190); seeking to develop in their students what Shor (1992) refers to as “critical thought” (p. 56). Social reconstructionist theorists hope to prepare future citizens to reconstruct society so that it better serves the interests of all groups of people and especially those who are of color, poor, female, gay, lesbian, transsexual, disabled, or any combination of these.

Some researchers have documented teachers’ efforts to practice social justice-based social studies pedagogy. In a study of teacher practice, Andra Makler and Ruth Hubbard (2000) engaged in a qualitative research study designed to find out how social studies teachers conceptualized the idea of justice, if and where in their curricula they believed they helped students to explore issues of justice, and what meanings their students derived from their classes. Most of the teachers taught lessons about injustice, such as the treatment of minority groups in U.S. history, treatment of women in other cultures, court cases about civil liberties, and news accounts of inhuman treatment of people all over the globe. Teachers were found by Makler and Hubbard to use a mix of whole-class discussion, small-group work, direct instruction, and highly
participatory activities such as debates, role-plays and mock trials to explore with students controversies that exist within our country and political system.

In a study of elementary teachers using social studies curriculum to teach about, and for, social justice, Rahima Wade (2007) integrates the experiences of more than 40 elementary school teachers across the country to design a practical resource for elementary and pre-service teachers who aim to teach social studies for social justice. In the resource, Wade suggests that students may be able to relate more clearly to two central features surrounding social justice, care and fairness.

Social justice-oriented social studies teaching reflects an understanding that teachers can work to: challenge and alter an educational system inadequately serving large numbers of children, particularly poor children, children of color, and children with special needs (Kozol, 1991; Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Zollers et al., 2000); develop and enact academically rigorous curriculum relevant to the increasingly racially and ethnically diverse student population and bolstering the learning and achievement of all students in the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994, Sleeter, 2005; Zeichner, 2003); and challenge students to be active participants in our democratic society (Oakes & Lipton; Nieto, 2000). This perspective assumes our teachers cannot “surrender to a system” (Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, & Miller, 2001) that produces and perpetuates injustice. In a social reconstructionist approach to schooling, teachers work to unpack the “hidden curriculum” (Horn, 2003; Sambell & McDowell, 1998), reforming and restructuring curriculum so that students are challenged to question and examine the social structure of society, unpack assumptions around race, class, and gender, connect current issues to historical trends of the past, and critically challenge single versions of the truth (Au, 2009; Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Banks, 2004; Quartz, 2003, Sleeter; Zeichner). Teachers working within this framework enact lessons that challenge students “to critique prevailing norms, to examine underlying assumptions and values, and to explore their own roles in relation to social problems.” (Wade, 2007, p. 11). To teach social studies for social justice requires one to challenge the hegemonic, status quo norms of historical knowledge and seriously examine the “Eurocentric cultural values, norms, and expectations that form the dominant perspectives through which many of us theorize about education and develop curriculum” (Lee, Menkart, & Okaazawa-Rey, 2006, p. x). In a Eurocentric, patriarchic curriculum, taken-for-granted themes undergird the content of curriculum. Texts, in general suggest that in the USA almost everyone is White, middle class, Christian, and heterosexual, and that people have not struggled over distribution of wealth; the USA is a land of wealth and opportunity, anyone can get what s/he works for; some social problems existed in the past, but they have been solved; and the USA is basically white, middle-class, Christian, and heterosexual (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Typically, U.S. history texts start in Europe, moving from British settlements on the East Coast, westward. Texts may include Native Americans, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, but only as they relate to the larger story dominated by white people (Sleeter & Grant). Social studies for social justice supports the continuing development of juxtaposing historical text and content against various points of reference, so that we may able to develop a more critical and comprehensive understanding of reality (Zinn, 2003).

A social justice-based social studies curriculum is focused on multiplicity, conflict, and complexity (Agarwal, 2011), requiring teachers and students to examine whose voice or perspective may be left out of the Eurocentric narrative. In teaching social studies for social justice, teachers work to instill wonder in their students, building curriculum that connects to
their students’ lives and prior learning. Teachers and students raise questions such as: Who or what is absent from this text? Who stands to benefit or be hurt from this text? How is language used in specific ways to convey specific ideas in this text? Teachers challenge normative thought by integrating multiple perspectives into the curriculum, especially the voices of those dominated, marginalized, or excluded in texts. Wade explains, “teaching multiple perspectives can help students realize that there is more than one story that can be told about any event that happens” (2007, p. 38). To encourage understanding and empathy, teachers ask students to write dialogue poems or first person narratives.

Students are given opportunities to critique past and current social problems by engaging in book reviews, examining primary resources and documents, and/or participating in simulations and role-plays. Connecting historical injustice to injustice in current events is important. Students connect the stories of struggle and resistance to contemporary social justice issues and make connections between historical events and present-day circumstances. Inspired by the stories of people who have worked for human rights, students seek opportunities to make change in their school and community. Teachers and students facilitate action in myriad ways by writing letters to city council members, fundraising, school-based activism, and/or organizing social action campaigns.

**Method**

This paper stems from a larger, year-long multi-case study designed to document and analyze beginning elementary school teachers’ conceptions and enactments of social justice-oriented social studies curricula (Agarwal, 2011). The case highlighted in this study, Tanisha, specifically was spotlighted because of the participant’s clear articulations of the tensions between the ideals of teaching social studies for social justice and classroom practice. Tanisha’s case study offers insight into the challenges and complexities of translating social justice pedagogy into a context constrained by accountability demands. Data collected in this study were used to “understand [the] experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2001, p. 21) of one beginning teacher and the ways in which she conceptualized and enacted social justice-oriented social studies curricula. The collection of data was used to highlight and critically analyze some of the important possibilities and challenges occurring when preparing teachers to teach social studies for social justice.

The participant for this case study, Tanisha, was recruited through purposeful sampling. Tanisha recently graduated from a social justice-oriented inclusive teacher education Master’s degree program. Her name was provided by the chair of the teacher education department. After receiving her name, I met with Tanisha to explain that I was interested in looking at how beginning teachers enact social justice curricula in their classrooms. Tanisha expressed a commitment to social justice and agreed to have her lessons documented.

At the time of the study, Tanisha was a second year fifth grade teacher at P.S. 555, an elementary pre-Kindergarten-6 public school in New York City in proximity to the University which credentialed the teachers. The principal of P.S. 555 was well known for his efforts in moving the school from a low-performing school in the city to a place where students are motivated and prepared to go to college. The administration, faculty, teachers, and parents appeared heavily committed to preparing the predominately Black and Latino population to succeed on standardized tests.

Data were collected through two semi-structured formal interviews conducted at both the beginning and end of the school year (approximately 45 minutes), three formal observations,
multiple informal chats and a week-long continuous visit to the teacher participant’s classroom at the end of the school year. Questions asked during interviews and informal chats were structured organically “from what the participants narrate” (Bloom, 1998, p. 20) in the effort to breakdown one-way hierarchal framework of traditional interview techniques to build meaningful, personal relationships with my participant while collecting data (Bloom, 1998; DeVault, 1999; Shaw, 2004).

After completing the initial interviews with Tanisha, I sent an email or stopped by Tanisha’s classroom approximately once a week, to see if she would be teaching social studies lessons with social justice content. These short conversations, or informal chats, contributed to the data set as well, as many times, she expressed feelings of distress as her efforts to teach for social justice were set aside due to commitments such as preparing students for standardized tests or “catching up” with mandated curricular goals.

During the month of March, I observed and documented three lessons in Tanisha’s classroom. Following each of the three lessons, I met with Tanisha during her next open period and asked questions related to her social justice-oriented social studies enactments. During these informal chats, Tanisha identified issues such as why she decided to teach the lesson, what her objectives were, and the constraints she may have faced in enacting the lesson.

Because a minimal number of lessons on social justice content were documented in Tanisha’s classroom, one week was spent shadowing her during the month of May. The purpose of these visits was to better understand the hindrances this teacher faced in enacting her ideal into practice.

Audio tapes collected from individual interviews and informal chats were transcribed one week within the interview. After data were collected and interviews transcribed, data were read and re-read multiple times in the effort to become close to the data in an “intimate way” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 152). When beginning the coding process, I was particularly interested in understanding if and how the teacher’s conceptions of social justice translated into her classroom practice. I borrowed categories from a previous study co-conducted on elementary pre-service teachers and teaching for social justice (Agarwal, 2010) to code the data. The predetermined categories: supports and hindrances the teachers experienced in schools; personal backgrounds; and views on social justice-oriented teaching served as trigger words to begin the coding process.

After the data were read through for initial trigger words, I electronically cut and pasted pieces of data under the following themes: conceptions; enactments; influences; constraints; and supports. After coding the data, I looked at how the participant’s conceptions of social justice translated into classroom practice, paying specific attention to the shifts and changes in her social justice ideals.

**Case Study**

In this section, I highlight Tanisha’s conceptions of social justice and the translation of her ideals into practice. This case elucidates some of the complexities and struggles related to teaching social studies for social justice in this sample context which was constrained by accountability demands.

As a woman of color who had seen and experienced the inequities that exist within the institution of schooling, Tanisha said she dedicated herself to teaching students to use their voice to question the injustices they see in this world. She expressed the hope that she could prepare her students with the tools and thirst to ask questions and work toward social change.
Tanisha indicated she perceived her schooling experience as far from positive. She moved often, experiencing stark disparities in schools depending on the community she lived in. During high school, Tanisha was bussed into a predominately White, college preparatory school, “one of the best districts in the country.” Yet, when Tanisha asked her psychology teacher for a letter of recommendation, even though she had “perfect grades” her teacher told her she was not college material. Tanisha was deeply impacted by her teacher’s refusal to write a letter of recommendation. Tanisha explained that without her mother as a role model (a single working mother of two) and family to support her, “I wouldn’t be here. I definitely wouldn’t have gone to college.”

Tanisha’s negative experiences with school fostered in her a commitment toward social justice and a dedication to be an advocate for the students with whom she works. When describing the social justice-related discussions she had with her students, Tanisha explained that she drew heavily upon her personal experiences to connect with her students and offer them an example of strength and resiliency. She indicated:

I set myself as an example. I use my experiences…I grew up in so many different places and I grew up in so many different families with my mother and then my father going back and forth, living in different places. I just try to be a role model, an example of what you could be and that’s important to me.

As Tanisha’s mother served as a role model for her, Tanisha hoped to be a support system and role model for her students. When I asked Tanisha about her conception of social justice, she explained:

The main thing that I try to focus on is…That they are beautiful…a lot of them do not view themselves as beautiful or pretty or anything remotely like that, or as good or smart. That’s something that really bothers me, so I want them to know that they are, and I want them to know that there’s other people [sic] that look like them that are equally as smart.

By encouraging her students to see their self-worth, Tanisha hoped students would feel empowered to be critical of the world around them and use their voice to make change. She maintained, “I want them to question things, I want them to know they have a voice and to use it. I want them to know that they come from a long history of people that stood up and did something and they could be part of that.” Tanisha perceived her role as a change agent, believing that “each class I have is my little army to keep on changing the world, to keep on doing something.”

Navigating mandated curriculum, while also finding a space to teach social justice, was especially challenging for Tanisha. During a collaborative group discussion, I learned that the teachers would be formally observed by their principal and vice-principal in social studies. The 5th grade team was expected to teach a unit on Mexico from the mandated social studies curriculum, as this was aligned with their school’s social studies curriculum pacing guides and connected to the New York state standards. Tanisha explained to me, “I might not be able to start [teaching for social justice] right away because…I have to do this Mexico thing…because we are going to be observed in social studies.” She continued, “I just want to be able to finish things [the unit on Mexico] I have lined up to show her [the vice-principal] by the time she has the post-conference with me.” When Tanisha’s colleague asked her if she might teach a social studies lesson that was social justice-oriented, Tanisha asserted, “I would rather explain this [a social studies lesson] to the principal, because he is going to ask what are the standards, and so forth, and I can’t really explain it in a social justice lesson.” Even as the social studies mandated curriculum was not scripted, Tanisha did not believe she could integrate social justice content.
into the lesson and meet administrative expectations. To Tanisha, teaching about and for social justice was something done outside of the general curriculum.

Tanisha responded to the pressure of being observed by postponing her commitment to teach social studies for social justice. To her, it seemed more reasonable to complete the unit on Mexico in her mandated social studies textbook and then follow through with her commitment to teach lessons with social justice content.

After Tanisha finished her unit on Mexico, she invited me to observe a series of three lessons, each enacted on a different day, based on an Oprah Winfrey television show episode. The episode described Oprah Winfrey’s Leadership School in South Africa, documenting the difficult challenges that inhibited the girls in the program from receiving proper access to education. The purpose of Oprah Winfrey’s Leadership School was to change the trajectory of these students’ lives. After watching the program, Tanisha led students in multiple activities/discussions such as deconstructing the value of education; considering the stereotypes one may have about people in Africa; making connections between themselves and the girls in the video; and sharing examples of friends and family members that overcame adversity. Tanisha ended the series of lessons having students list what the girls “had to overcome on a daily basis” and what may “help them to overcome their obstacles.”

For Tanisha, the purpose of the lessons was to get students “to question and think… I just want them [my students] to open their mind to it [the episode].” She explained:

I pointed out when Oprah Winfrey talked about the outhouse. The students were acting like we don’t have outhouses in America…And, it bothered me because why are they saying that? Because it’s different from us so it’s wrong. I just want them to question what makes it wrong, because it’s different doesn’t necessarily make it wrong. Because we do it, because American culture does it, or you do it, or your specific group does, doesn’t mean it’s right, it just means it’s different. Look at it, and open your mind to that.

Tanisha’s efforts to engage her students in a critical examination of their assumptions, values, and beliefs surrounding what they view as normal can be seen as deeply connected to their conceptions of social justice. In her mind, the lessons based on those presented using the Oprah Winfrey content were social justice-oriented (unlike the lessons she taught for the Mexico unit). For Tanisha to teach for social justice, she needed to set aside her daily social studies curriculum to translate her ideals into practice. The social justice-oriented lessons observed were not connected to the social studies curriculum or the state standards.

While Tanisha envisioned her students as questioning the world around them, using their voice to make change, and finding some space to translate her visions of social justice teaching into practice, she struggled to integrate social justice issues into the mandated social studies curriculum. With the challenges of also being a beginning teacher in front of her, Tanisha explained that behavior issues inhibited her from facilitating more discussions with social justice content. In the exit interview she explained:

There is always some kind of problem with somebody…I feel like a lot of my time in this class is [spent] dealing with that, and dealing with how to communicate, and how to respect people’s differences and respect cultures, and respect differences…I do a lot of community building.

For Tanisha, finding a place to teach social studies for social justice amidst the daily realities of teaching and expectations required of administration proved a daunting endeavor.
Findings

According to Tanisha, teaching for social justice required one to be an advocate for students, empowering students to use their voice to critically examine and question the world around them.

Grounded in a social reconstructionist framework, Tanisha enacted lessons that worked to instill a critical consciousness in her students. She promoted conversation around difference and taught students to examine their own biases and assumptions in order to deconstruct normative thought. As students were asked to make connections between themselves and the girls in the Oprah Winfrey episode video, Tanisha encouraged her students to self-reflect on what they may consider normal, right, or typical in a situational context internal and external to the classroom.

Aside from the three lessons documented for this study, Tanisha struggled to find the space to teach social studies for social justice. Like many beginning teachers, Tanisha focused a large amount of time toward classroom management and dealing with behavior issues. In addition to dealing with the daily realities of teaching, such as classroom management, Tanisha found it difficult to integrate social justice content into her social studies lessons. Tanisha purposely postponed her commitment to teach for social justice in order to enact a unit on Mexico, but did not try to integrate the expectations of the administration with her own commitment to social justice. Even if the administration planned to formally observe a social studies lesson, was it not possible to infuse social justice content into a lesson on Mexico? For Tanisha, this was not the case. According to her, the lesson on Mexico took precedence over her own commitment to teach for social justice.

From Tanisha’s perspective, teaching for social justice was disconnected from the content standards, misaligned with administrative expectations, and a separate entity that was forced to trail behind mandated curricular commitments. In terms of curriculum design, Tanisha’s understandings of social justice were more in line with an additive, rather than a social reconstructionist approach to teaching for social justice. In an additive approach, a teacher directly puts social justice content, “into the curriculum without restructuring it, which takes substantial time, effort, training, and rethinking of the curriculum and its purposes, nature, and goals” (Lee et al., 2006, p. 37-38).

Tanisha purposely set aside her commitment to teach for social justice in order to teach a lesson or unit on Mexico from the mandated curriculum. Alternatively, Tanisha could find ways to uphold her commitment to teach for social justice and meet administrative demands. As the perspective of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans may be silenced in social studies textbooks, Tanisha could lean on the work of Bill Bigelow (2006) and his book, “The Line Between Us: Teaching About the Border and Mexican Immigration” to find ways to integrate multiple perspectives into the mandated curriculum. Students, for example, could critically examine the link between trade and immigration by engaging in the North American Free Trade Agreement Role Play (Bigelow, 2006, p. 63). Students could work as “textbook detectives,” asking critical questions about the textbooks’ treatment of Mexicans during the U.S.-Mexico War. As Bigelow (2006) asserts:

This critical reading activity encourages students to be aware of whose lives and perspectives are missing from a particular text, to think about who benefits and who suffers from different versions of history, and to question the implications of length and detail in a given text” (p. 125).
Teachers could draw on primary resources, pictures and documents, as a means for students to question and challenge single versions of truth depicted in textbooks. Using role plays, stories, poetry, guest speakers, and literature, teachers could help students explore the history of U.S. relations and the roots of Mexican immigration. Teachers could challenge students to make past to present connections, looking specifically at the controversies surrounding Arizona’s current legislation movements and the rights of undocumented workers. The teacher, then, could encourage students to think of ways to work toward social change (e.g., petitioning for the rights of undocumented workers and/or fund-raising for the community).

By integrating social justice content into the mandated curriculum, Tanisha may be able to better translate her vision into practice and meet administrative demands. Whereas an additive approach requires that teachers carve out space to teach for social justice, a social reconstructionist framework considers the rethinking and restructuring of the general curriculum. Literature shows that the current context of accountability and high-stakes testing is deeply associated with the pressure to raise test scores and adhere to a mandated curriculum (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Sleeter, 2005). For this reason, it is not difficult to imagine that navigating through this context in order to teach isolated lessons with social justice content may be especially difficult. Not only did Tanisha have to enact mandated curricula, she also had to find separate space and time during which to plan for and enact lessons with social justice content. In effect, teaching for social justice as an add-on required Tanisha to plan for, and enact, an entirely separate curriculum designed and created by her (as seen enacted in the three lessons observed). By integrating social justice content into the mandated curriculum and building social justice-oriented social studies curriculum conscious of the state standards, Tanisha would not have to find space and time outside of their daily schedule. Rather, she would be able to both meet administrative expectations and uphold her commitment to teach for social justice.

Implications

Teachers cannot fix the problems of society by “teaching better;” nor can teachers alone alter the life chances of the children they teach; however, teaching for social justice has the potential to contribute to the transformation of society’s fundamental inequalities in essential ways (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Tanisha reminds teacher educators that, while graduates may leave their preparation programs with strong visions “to change the world”, they may find it difficult to translate their social justice-oriented vision into practice. Teachers may struggle with their depth of knowledge and understanding of social justice, while also being unsure of how to bridge their visions of social justice with the daily realities of teaching.

In preparing teachers to teach social studies for social justice, teacher educators often elicit discussions and activities that challenge pre-service teachers to critique prevailing norms and examine underlying assumptions and values while also analyzing the roots of inequality in the curriculum, schools, and society. Teacher educators may ask students to consider multiple perspectives when preparing social studies lessons, realizing that there is “more than one story that can be told about any event that happens” (Wade, 2007, p. 38). In addition, teacher educators may model for their pre-service teachers how to enliven the curriculum by integrating primary/secondary sources, role-play, simulations, guest speakers, literature, and reflective writing to bring meaningful social justice content to classroom lessons.
As teacher educators committed to social justice, we must take concrete steps to recognize the importance of providing pre-service teachers with an understanding of how to translate theory into practice, elucidating the complexities in translating a social justice vision into a context of accountability and standardization. As teachers often are required to follow a mandated curriculum and/or state content standards, they need to learn to effectively discern between what to teach, what not to teach, and how to teach it. Social studies for social justice often requires a “rethinking of the curriculum and its purposes, nature, and goals” (Lee et al., 2006, p. 38). For example, teachers often are required to rely on their textbooks to shape curricula. Instructors could facilitate discussions that challenge pre-service teachers to find ways in which textbooks could be used to help sharpen students’ critical reading and analytical skills. In this regard, I suggest scaffolding opportunities for pre-service teachers to restructure and reshape the existing curriculum to design lesson plans that integrate marginalized knowledge. We, as their instructors, could help model for our students how to build curriculum around the state content standards that meets the demands of administration expectations and our own visions to teach social studies for social justice. An instructor, for example, may enact a lesson on Columbus’ voyage to the Americas, a commonly taught event in fifth grade social studies texts. The instructors could model for pre-service students how to question curricular texts (whose voice is left out), how to integrate multiple perspectives (e.g. Native Americans), connect the past to the present (e.g. discuss colonization and its effect today, how, and where colonization still exists today, celebrating Columbus Day), and facilitate action (e.g. writing letters to the district requiring the “true” story of Columbus day to be written into textbooks). In terms of developing social reconstructionist curriculum, teachers often “need guidance locating material” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 93). Instructors could allot time for students to search library databases, selecting adult literature that would help them study “bodies of knowledge that have been historically marginalized or subjugated” (Sleeter, 2005, p. 83). Instructors could also invite social justice-oriented social studies teachers into the classroom to share their work and discuss ways in which they were able to navigate an accountability context to teach for social justice. As a teacher educator, one could also provide assignments which engage students in engaging in primary and secondary research to strengthen their knowledge base, so that students deepen their understandings around events, topics, and issues they plan to teach. Thus, teachers would be able to see and hear concrete, contextual examples of how one can reshape and restructure curricula within a context of high-stakes testing and accountability. In this effort, teachers may begin to think “contextually and critically” (Brown, 2004, p. 81) so pressures such as mandated curriculum and high-stakes testing fail to deter them from translating their visions of social justice into practice.

In accord with Cochran-Smith (2004), I believe that research is needed which studies, “the impacts of teacher preparation, entry into teaching, and the conditions that support and constrain teacher effectiveness” (p. 156). Given this call for research, few studies examine what prospective teachers do with what they learn in their teacher education programs. Longitudinal data is needed that studies teachers through their first few years of teaching. In gaining tenure, do teachers learn to better navigate a context of accountability or do they continue to struggle to find places to teach for social justice? If and how do teachers reform, adapt, and modify mandated curriculum structure to teach for social justice?

By continuing our study of teachers as they learn to teach, we may be able to better prepare teachers in the complex, challenging, and difficult task of teaching for social justice.
References


**About the Author**

Ruchi Agarwal is a former elementary public school teacher and currently teaches social studies and literacy courses at San Francisco State University. Her research interests include social studies and social justice education, critical literacy, and the study of theory into practice. E-mail: rarangnath@gmail.com