Roles, practices and contexts for acting as agents of social justice - student teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

Student teachers are oftentimes encouraged to apply theoretical principles of social justice to their professional practice. However, this can be problematic when theoretical knowledge is contested, or if it is inconsistent with the practices in their future workplaces. Studies in this area often examine student teachers' beliefs and understanding of their roles without taking account of how concrete working contexts shape what they see as possible in their practice. This study explored how students in two teacher education programmes based at the University of Edinburgh perceived their roles, practices and contexts for acting as agents of social justice. Mixed methods were used for data generation and triangulation including a questionnaire survey (n=299) and scenario-based interviews (n=9) to explore how students think about social justice issues in context. Student teachers generally saw agency for social justice as part of their role. Their understanding of the ways of addressing context-embedded issues of social justice focused on classroom practices while they raised concerns about how their practice depends on others in the system. We discuss the implications of these findings for teacher education.

Introduction

The idea that teachers should be prepared to act as agents of change for social justice is increasingly promoted in education literature and policies (Ballard, 2012; Scottish Government 2011; Zeichner, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In Scotland, a review of teacher education 'Teaching Scotland's Future' calls for the preparation of teachers as 'prime agents of change' and suggests that 'all new teachers should be confident in their ability to address underachievement, including the potential effects of social disadvantage' (Scottish Government 2011, p. 36). Internationally, the demographic of schooling reflects increasing diversity of student populations, while teachers often report feeling insufficiently prepared for teaching diverse groups of learners (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013; Florian & Pantić, 2017).

Although issues of ethics and social justice often feature in the aims and objectives of teacher education programmes, there is little evidence of their impact on the development of teachers' agency for enhancing social justice in practice (Charteris & Smardon, 2015). Agency is highly contingent on the structures and cultures within which it is exercised (Archer, 2000, Giddens, 1984). Although students are oftentimes encouraged to apply theoretical principles of social justice in their professional practice, this can be problematic when theoretical knowledge is

contested or if it is inconsistent with current practices in their workplaces. The contested nature and variable enactment of social justice in practice makes it difficult to isolate the many personal and structural influences that might support or impede teacher agency for social justice. We use 'social justice' as a broad term to refer to teachers' inclusive practices for contributing to greater educational equality by addressing risks of exclusion and underachievement of vulnerable students, as well as to the larger transformation of educational structures and cultures that extends beyond classrooms and schools.

A recent review of teacher preparation research (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015) identified many studies that examined the influences of programmes on student teachers' beliefs, but also called for more research that 'goes beyond assuming that changing teacher candidates' beliefs necessarily leads to different behaviours and actions in the contexts of their classrooms and schools' (p. 117). Our study employed a novel approach to developing a deeper understanding of the links between student teachers' perceptions of their roles as agents of social justice, and their contextualised practices. We employ mixed methods and original techniques that enable us to access student teachers' thinking and beliefs in relation to specific scenarios in order to make visible their contextualised judgment about possible actions. This approach acknowledges that preparation for addressing barriers to learning for vulnerable students is not likely to be a matter of applying theoretical knowledge in individual classroom practices. Rather, it recognises the need to specify what would count as evidence of socially just practice in the different contexts of teachers' future workplaces. The novelty of this approach is a research design that captures such evidence by applying original analytical concepts and using innovative tools that enable a distinction between the domains of agency that can be supported in teacher education programmes, such as *sense of purpose* and *competence*, and the issues of teachers' *autonomy* within the structures and cultures of the workplace, which might support or impede agency for social justice.

Scottish context

The study was conducted in Scotland where a number of policies call for teachers to look beyond their classrooms in order to promote the learning of all. For example, the 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (Scottish Government, 2014) policy calls for teachers to work with other services and communities in order to support the learning and wellbeing of all children. In 2015 the government launched the 'Scottish Attainment Challenge' for equity in educational outcomes with a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap that persist in

Scotland and other UK countries (OECD, 2012). In this context, there has been a great deal of emphasis on social justice and inclusion in Scottish teacher education (see e.g. Arshad et el., 2012; Florian & Rouse, 2009).

The study participants were drawn from the undergraduate programmes for primary school teachers (Primary Education and Physical Education) based in the School of Education of the University of Edinburgh. These programmes were selected as they have been specifically designed to promote socially just professional practices.

The programmes cover a variety of issues related to specific forms of discrimination in relation to a range of diversity markers such as language, gender, ability and socio-economic status (Arshad et el., 2012). The overarching approach is to promote social justice and equality through teachers' inclusive practices that extend what is ordinarily available to all, by removing the various barriers experienced by some learners (Florian & Spratt, 2013). While such inclusive practices might look differently in different contexts, they invariably require that teachers' engage with the broader social and educational contexts of their practice, and with other relevant agents such as families and other professionals (Pantić & Florian, 2015).

Aims

The aim of the study was to explore student teachers' perceptions of agency, including their sense of professional roles and context-embedded practices. The overall research question was:

- What are students' perceptions of their roles and practices as agents of social justice?

With regard to practices we sought to address two subsidiary questions:

- How do student teachers make judgements and decisions about their practice in context?
- What opportunities and constraints to their agency do they perceive within given structures and cultures?

The research was designed to capture the links between students' contextualised thinking about the principles promoted on the various programmes whilst acknowledging and including contextual factors that could help or hinder the exercise of agency in professional settings.

This is significant because teacher education programmes in Scotland and elsewhere are increasingly required to demonstrate how they prepare teachers to teach inclusively in the contexts of changing demographics of student populations (Florian & Pantić, 2017).

Conceptual framework

Teacher agency for social justice

The research is underpinned by influential theories of human agency (Archer, 2000; Giddens, 1984) which suggest that agency involves intentionality, guided by a *sense of purpose* (belief that certain practice is worthwhile), *competence* (knowing how to influence a desired outcome in practice), a degree of *autonomy* (power to make a difference in interaction with other actors), and *reflexivity* (a capacity to monitor and evaluate one's practices and contexts). Such agency depends on the structures and cultures (rules, resources and power relations) which can be reproduced or at least to some extent transformed over time (Archer, 2000). The research is further informed by studies of professional agency (Eteläpelto et al. 2013) applied to teaching (Lasky, 2005; Pantić, 2015a; Priestley et al. 2012). The following domains of agency are explored in students' reflections on their roles and practices as agents of social justice:

- *Sense of purpose*

Teachers' acting as agents is informed by their underlying beliefs about their professional roles (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015). They might perceive their roles as implementers of their school or authorities' policies, as well as 'step up' above and beyond the perceived expectations of their roles, or 'push back' when there is a disconnect between teachers' believes and policies (Buchanan, 2015, p. 710). With regard to agency for social justice, the study used a continuum between views of teachers as 'technicians' who apply rules and procedures uncritically accepting standard school practices, and those of teachers as 'agents of change' who see schools as potential sites for promoting social equality (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 54).

- *Competence*

Competence refers to the nature of practices that reflect these beliefs. We explored the extent to which students perceived their own capacity for acting in relation to the external influences, and how the practices they recognise as possible align to the principles of inclusive pedagogy, including creative ways of working with others (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Pantić & Florian, 2015). A distinctive inclusive pedagogical approach (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011) involves ways of working with others intended to mitigate the external causes of educational inequality. It is concerned with educational attainment as well as other outcomes and attends to individual differences between learners while actively avoiding the marginalisation of some learners and/or groups, for example, ethnic minority students or those who may be disadvantaged by poverty. This approach represents a specific view of inclusive education as learning how to

respect and respond to human differences in ways that include, rather than exclude, learners from what is ordinarily available in the daily routines of schooling as opposed to doing something 'additional' or 'different' for some (Florian 2009).

- *Autonomy*

An important aspect of human agency is the power that actors are able to mobilise within social structures, and given levels of autonomy and interdependence with other agents (Archer, 2000; Giddens, 1984). Using support of others is part of relational agency - a capacity for working purposefully and flexibly with others (Edwards, 2010; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). We sought to capture students' decision-making processes relative to different structural factors that they perceive as opportunities and/or barriers to exercising agency within a specific setting.

- *Reflexivity*

Finally, agency involves reflection on social contexts to envisage alternatives and work with others to bring about their transformation (Pantić & Florian, 2015). This is why we explored students' reflections on their roles and possible practices as agents of social justice.

Teacher education for social justice

A recent review of research on teacher education for social justice (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016) established that empirical research in the field is both scant and methodologically limited. Much of this research, often done in small scale, qualitative studies, focuses on an understanding of beliefs of preservice teachers, with limited exploration of the links between preservice teachers' understandings of social justice and their teaching practices. For example, studies of the impact of particular teacher education units have shown that student teachers' believes and attitudes to social justice issues do change over the course of their preparation (Enterline et al., 2008; Ritchie et al., 2013, Tatto, 1996), but we still know little about how those beliefs translate in teachers' context embedded practices. It might be one thing for student teachers to agree about the desirable values such as social justice, but quite another to understand what justice actually means, or what it means for different students in different circumstances (Carr, 2003; Campbell, 2004).

In summary, the reviews of teacher education (e.g. Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016; Sleeter, 2014) highlighted the need to examine how student teachers' beliefs translate into their practices, given that these can be in conflict (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). Our study offers a robust methodology for examining teachers' context-embedded beliefs to

advance the understanding of the relation between student teachers' beliefs and actual practices.

Methodology

Mixed methods and tools developed in a previous study of teacher agency (Pantić, 2015b) were adapted and used to generate and triangulate data on student teachers' perceptions of their roles and practices. The research tools included a questionnaire and scenario-based interviews.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire included opening questions about participants' demographic information (see Table 1), and sections focusing on participants' sense of purpose (8 items about perceptions of professional role, e.g. 'Supporting pupils' wellbeing…'), and competence (7 items focusing on the ways of addressing issues of social justice, e.g. 'building positive relationships with pupils'). Participants were asked to rank these items in the order of priority starting from 1 for the most important items and ranking as many as apply in the order of priorities, with the highest number indicating the least important item in each section[1]. Participants also had a chance to add 'other' items they found important to each set of items.

Scenario-based interviews

Each interview started with a task simulation, one of the methods from Applied Cognitive Task Analysis (ACTA, Militello & Hutton, 1998) used here to provide a view of the students' problem solving processes in context. This tool made student teachers' thinking 'visible' and offered a unique window on the cognitive demands on judgement and decision making when acting as agents of social justice. The simulation provided specific detailed information about the students' cognitive processes when responding to a social justice scenario (see Appendix for a sample scenario). Simulations of tasks that student teachers may face around issues of social justice were designed to be realistic and challenging by the tutors leading the participating programmes. The respondents were told "As you experience this simulation, imagine you are the student teacher in the incident… How would you approach this situation?" Students were then guided to identify key issues by thinking about the scenario and listing the major issues and events – this could include judgments or decision points. As the student named them these were listed by the researcher. For each issue/event, the student was then asked the following questions: As the student teacher in this scenario, what actions if any, would you

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[1] For example, the competence section that focused on efficacy had 11 items to be ranked in order of priority with 1 been the most important and 11 being the least important one if a participant ranked all items.

take at this point in time? What do you think is going on here? What is your assessment of the situation at this point in time? What pieces of information led you to this situation assessment and these actions? (critical cues), and what errors would an inexperienced teacher be likely to make in this situation? (see Table 2). In particular, this method created an opportunity to access and examine how teachers conceptualise issues of social justice, and what opportunities for addressing these they perceive within given contexts. This approach is original because it enabled us to examine how students' espoused values and beliefs reflected in their context-embedded understanding of possible actions, including any discrepancies between them. This is the first use of cognitive task analysis within a setting of teaching for social justice that we are aware of.

In addition, interview questions focusing on students' perceptions of the aspects of agency previously developed with teachers (Pantić, 2015b) were adapted for collection of data from student teachers (e. g. What do you see as the most important aspect of your professional role?).

Participants and procedures

The questionnaire was circulated online via SNAP survey software email link to 500 students enrolled on the Programmes A and B (details removed for blind peer review). Due to the low response rates (only 25) to the online questionnaire, 370 paper-based questionnaires were administered directly to the same participants by the main researcher. The researcher was employed for the research project and was not teaching or otherwise involved in any of the programmes. Course tutors provided access to classes for the researcher to present the project and invite students to participate. It was made clear that the students' decision to participate or not, did not have any adversary consequences or any relation to the course work and assessment. The response to the questionnaire was rewarded with a voucher for purchase of books. Paper-based questionnaire responses (274) were entered into the SNAP on-line survey adding to the online responses. All 299 responses were downloaded for analysis representing a response rate of 60% (see Table 1 for participants' characteristics).

All participants were given the option of participating in the scenario-based interviews as a question on the questionnaire. Forty students who expressed the wish to proceed were contacted via email. Nine students who responded and came to meet the researcher at the scheduled time have participated. All interviews were transcribed. The interviewees provided contextualised accounts of their beliefs that helped us better understand the survey responses.

Table 1: Number of participants in each activity by programme, year of study and gender

Number of Participants by	Questionnaire	Interviews
Programme		
Primary Education	153 (51%)	8
Physical Education	146 (49 %)	1
Year of study		
Year one	136 (46%)	1
Year two	51 (17%)	1
Year three	25 (8%)	0
Year four	86 (29%)	7
Gender		
Male	69 (23%)	3
Female	229 (77%)	6
Total	**299**	**9**

286 students (95.7%) had direct experience of working in schools. All those without school experience were in their first year of study. For the majority of the participants direct experience in schools ranged from 1 week to 21 weeks on placement and/or work experiences. A few students have worked as support staff in schools for a whole year, and two students had worked in nurseries and as sports coaches for 10 and 6 years respectively.

It is possible that the students' who chose to participate had more interest in the issues of social justice since, the participants were made aware that they were signing up for a study about social justice, and that it was a study investigating how they take up social justice issues from their coursework in relation to professional practice. Unsurprisingly, most students who agreed to be interviewed were Year 4 students with more practical experience.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire and interview data were combined to explore students' *sense of purpose* and *competence* as agents, while their *autonomy* was explored with the scenario responses used to gauge students' *reflections* about acting in real contexts.

Questionnaire data was processed using SPSS, version 22. The data was checked for errors. The minimum and maximum values were within the expected range of scores for each variable with no errors detected. The missing data were dealt with by excluding cases pairwise, that is only where the data required for any specific analysis was missing.

Students' perceptions of their professional role were explored using the principle component analysis to test the theoretical assumption about the views of teachers as 'implementers' and 'agents of change' mentioned earlier. The data were established to be fit for principal component analyses after running the initial correlation matrix (with a few coefficients of .3 and above) and tests of sampling adequacy (the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .877) and sphericity (Bartlett's Test revealed a significance of .000). Considering the Kaiser-Guttman criterion of extracting factors with eigenvalues greater than one and the screen plot, we conducted a principal component analysis for the two-factor solution, followed by an oblimin rotation in order to aid in the interpretation of factors. We chose non-orthogonal rotation under the assumption that factors were likely to be related (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Eight items had pattern coefficients above +/-0.30. However, two items ('Promoting social justice' and 'Following professional code of conduct and ethics or professional behaviour') loaded above +/-0.30 on both factors (see Table 3). Items related to the two components were then used as a basis for constructing two subscales composed of four items each. The reliability coefficients of the two subscales and correlations between them were computed, as well as the mean scores for individual items. The reliability coefficients proved satisfactory (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.70) for both subscales (see Table 3). The correlation between the two subscales was moderate (r=0.45).

Interview data were analysed through a combination of open and deductive coding (Gibbs, 2007; King, 2004). Initial codes were developed based on the theoretical aspects of agency (for example, teachers' views about their roles as implementer and agents discussed above) and adapted after comparison and discussion among three researchers who had independently coded about 10% of data. These codes were then applied to all data (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011; MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998).

Interview transcripts were coded and then transferred into tables for each participant and summary tables based on codes across participants. Tables were used as data display strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003). Through this process, major themes were identified using a combination of deductive coding to classify data with regard to alignment with the theoretical aspects of teacher agency (Pantić, 2015a; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and inductive coding of specific subthemes within each category (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011; Gibbs, 2007) presented and discussed in the findings section.

Scenario responses were developed using extracts from the simulation task co-coded with another member of the research team, who also cross-checked in all stages of the analysis. The two researchers tested the consistency of code application on the data about one of the scenarios, which resulted in some relocation to themes (<3%) and clarification of terminology. Individual responses from the scenarios were compiled into a table reflecting all the key issues raised from the scenarios and the response about actions, situational analysis, critical cues, and potential errors for each key issue (see Table 2 for an example).

Table 2: Example of coding a response to scenario (see Appendix for scenario description)

Key issue	Robert's shoes not meeting the school's policy		
Actions (coded as 'building positive relationships with parents')	**Situational analysis**	**Critical cues**	**Potential errors**
• Provide an explanation in person for the forms that needed to be signed to all parents to avoid singling out Roberts parents to explain to them • Chat with parents when they come to pick Robert up from school or you can invite them for a chat. • Interact more with parents and find out more about them. • Discuss to try to see a way around to get him the shoes. • Maybe ask the parents, but I will not make such a big deal as long as they have something with them that they are going to be safe	• Family circumstances and knowing Robert's circumstances • Teacher did not know Robert's mum has MS thus financial difficulties because there is not enough parental involvement. • Parents low level of literacy and they are not understanding	• They are signing and returning forms but not adhering to the policy • Parents previous experience with authorities and special needs education	• Not explaining the situation to the parents properly • Not creating a relationship with Robert's parents

with when they are doing the PE.	what is sent home.		

Frequencies were used for checking the consistency of analysis of the data from different sources and gaging prevalent perceptions throughout the study.

The questionnaire-based findings were compared to the scenario-based interview responses to explore how the data collected with different tools fitted together in a design that employed different methods as complementary rather than merely mixed (Smith, 2006). Triangulation of data from different sources for each aspect of agency has enabled discussion of the similarities and differences in relation to the findings presented below.

Findings

Sense of purpose *– perceived professional role*

By and large the participants saw acting as agents of social justice as an integral part of their professional roles alongside, and as more important than implementing prescribed procedures. The mean scores of the subscales constructed from the questionnaire items reflecting perceptions of role as 'agents of change' were lower than those reflecting 'role-implementing' perceptions (see Table 3), indicating that the 'agentic' items were ranked as more important by student teachers.

Table 3: Mean scores for scales and items focusing on perceptions of professional roles with scale reliabilities and item loadings on 'agentic' and 'implementer' subscales

Items	'Agentic' scale	'Implementer' scale	Mean score	St. dev	N
Cronbach's Alpha	**.848**		**2.215**		
Meeting all pupils' needs	.963		1.76	1.668	291
Understanding pupils' specific situations	.849		2.10	1.642	291
Treating all pupils fairly	.750		2.26	2.019	290
Promoting social justice	.483	.464	2.79	1.935	290
Cronbach's Alpha		**.903**	**3.451**		

Following professional code of conduct and ethics or professional behaviour	.396	.585	2.77	2.183	291
Implementing school rules and procedures		.881	3.40	2.290	290
Implementing educational policies		.929	3.40	2.047	285
Raising the school's profile		.951	4.45	2.450	277

The interview data on participants' perceptions of the most important aspects of their professional role corroborate this survey-based finding. All participants discussed their roles in supporting children's learning and development in a broader sense than attainment:

> 'It's not just about attainment...your role is to socialise the kids and explain right from wrong cause a lot a' them don't get that. And to be a stable person in their lives because again a lot of the kids don't have stability' (Year 4 Primary Education Student).

This and other quotes also reflect a deficit view of students and families as being at fault, and a perception of teachers' role in remedying the students themselves, rather than the barriers they may be experiencing for meaningful participation in learning. Such findings highlight the difference between 'espoused' and 'practiced' beliefs (Argyris & Schön, 1978) and emphasise the challenge of helping students understand issues of social justice within their complex institutional and socio-cultural contexts. Stated and practiced values differ since people and institutions can transmit messages that are different from those they articulate (Ormell, 1993). This is why we collected complementary data about of teachers' perception of possible actions within the contexts of specific scenarios to gage their sense of competence and autonomy.

Competence – *perceptions of possible practice*

Although students perceived agency for social justice as part of their professional roles, they also expressed concerns about the extent to which they were able to take actions that promote social justice in practice. The implication of any action outside of what other teachers normally do was the main focus of these concerns, as this interview quote can illustrate:

> 'I think it'll depend on who influences the teacher…because for every section there'll still be a supervisor. And from the minute you're in your probation, it'll be whoever is

mentoring you that will be the person that decides what you're doing...Even if you have all the knowledge you need to be strong enough to believe in what you know is right and speak out. But you probably wouldn't do it in your probation year (Year 4 Primary Education Student)

Some discrepancy was found between the questionnaire and interview data. Questionnaire participants largely saw themselves as responsible for meeting the needs of all pupils regardless of their diverse needs, over and above other enablers related to pupils or institutional set-up (see Table 4).

Table 4: Perceptions of the most effective ways for addressing issues of social justice

Effective ways of teachers' addressing issues of social justice	Mean	St. Dev.	N
Promoting social justice in their individual practice	2.29	1.708	285
Building effective partnerships and coalitions with colleagues and other professionals (e.g. management)	2.66	1.749	286
Taking the initiative for their own professional development	2.89	1.921	281
Participating in organisational/institutional development planning	3.06	1.674	282
Getting involved in professional networks and associations	3.57	1.753	282
Getting involved in research and enquiry	3.65	1.923	281
Getting involved in national initiatives and debates	3.96	1.818	281
Other	4.89	2.494	18

However, in the interview data, the responsibility of addressing issues of social justice in practice was to a large extent seen to be dependent on the wider or broader context of practice (see perceived constraints in the 'Autonomy' section below).

Participants' perceptions of scope for exercising their agency is primarily within their individual practice, less within their institutions, and even less within broader social contexts (see Table 4).

The ranking of effective practices (with the lower mean indicating that the item was ranked higher) suggest participants perceive competence primarily in terms of what they could do

individually (i.e. what was within their sphere of influence) and less emphasis was placed on how they can work with others or the broader educational context.

The interview data shed further light on the nature of the perceived practices in terms of their alignment to the principles of inclusive pedagogy, such as emphasis of teachers' role in supporting a child's wellbeing, as well as learning (see perceived opportunities in the 'Autonomy' section below).

Autonomy

How do student teachers make judgments and decisions about their practice in context?

Participants made decisions on the kind of *actions* that they would take based on their perceived roles as teachers; their perception of what was fair for the child in the scenario; what effect the situation might have on the child's learning experiences; and how they perceived the role of others in the scenario (i.e., school management, parents, and other children).

Participants' *assessment of the situation* was based on the actions taken by the teacher in the scenario, as well as their understanding of what they expect to happen in any given situation. There were some instances of situational assessment where participants used knowledge from their own experiences in schools or from interacting with other experienced teachers to make judgements about the nature of action to take on the key issues raised from the scenarios.

Critical cues that informed their assessment of the situation and proposed actions were identified to be the background contextual information (e.g., family circumstances) and the school/classroom context (e.g., competing pressures on teachers). See Table 2 for examples of the various sources of information used to make judgements and decisions in this context.

Participants also identified *potential errors* that an inexperienced teacher might make for each of the key issues in the scenario, helpful for evaluating how well learners understand, and for comparing responses to those with greater proficiency in acting as agents of social justice.

The simulation interviews provided a very rich source of data in relation to how students 'think' about social justice scenarios, in particular we were able to identify what they perceived the key issues to be (issue conceptualisation), what actions they would take, how their assessment of the situation led them to these actions, what critical cues they were using, and what errors an inexperienced teacher may be likely to make. This information is useful for informing instructional design (i.e., future teaching content around issues of social justice, especially where gaps or difficult demands were identified).

These findings support existing literature and research which has found that Cognitive Task Analysis (CTA) techniques provide measurably greater quantities of useful information about how to perform tasks to a high level of proficiency than other methods such as observation alone or self-generated explanations (Tofel-Grehel & Feldon, 2013). Indeed, many professional fields are utilising such methods for training the judgement and decision making of developing practitioners for critical aspects of performance, e.g. in medicine, forensic science and athletic populations (e.g., Martindale & Collins, 2012; Martindale, Collins & Morton, 2017; Morozova, Martindale & Currie, 2017, Wingfield et al., 2014). The use of CTA procedures in our study enabled us to systematically capture information about the perceived contexts that influence (student) teachers' thinking and the cognitive demands placed on their professional judgments and actions.

Perceived opportunities that influenced participants' agency for social justice

Participants identified many potential actions, which represent their perceived opportunities for acting as agents of social justice. Given the structures and culture of the school, they identified how they could negotiate their actions to address the key issue identified. These proposed actions provide an insight into some of the opportunities that participants identified within the given structures in the context of the scenarios, such as:

- Building positive relationships with parents (see example in Table 2)

- Cooperation with other agencies

- Building positive relationships with students/developing empathy

- Modelling a disposition to fairness or making things fair for all

- Seeing a child holistically or child central to practice

- Promoting social justice/teaching in a way that promotes equity and inclusion

- Supporting child's wellbeing

- Understanding the influence of pupils' home situation

- Management support, leadership, trust, openness

- Promoting pupils' ownership of learning

- Ability to work with other professionals

- Effective communication

- Valuing teachers views and work

- Collegial support and trust

- Recognizing potential for transforming practice

- Using common sense to challenge 'politically correct policies'

- Building positive relationships or working with other colleagues or amongst colleagues

Through the scenario responses, participants discussed effective practices as focused on the learning needs of all children and emphasised that it is important to meet their needs in a manner that does not mark those at risk of discrimination as being different so that their membership in the classroom community is not undermined (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Participants saw opportunities for improvement of the practices of teachers in the scenarios presented to them, discussed how discrimination or unequal treatment could be experienced by children in different circumstances, and reflected on the need to pay attention to the needs of all children, as this response to the Alexander Scenario illustrates:

> '...it says here he thinks he has reached a good half way house by including some on the fringes of the activity, when really, you know, some is not good enough at the end of the day. You know, it needs to be everyone needs to be included, otherwise you fail the inclusion...that most and some approach, just is potentially the worst approach I've ever heard...' (Year 4 Physical Education student).

Perceived constraints to acting as agents of social justice

Through interviews and scenario responses, participants also discussed constraints that they perceived as hindering or influencing their ability to act as agents of social justice, such as:

- School policies

- Getting parents to become involved

- Difficult to challenge issues in private schools (due to fee paying structure)

- Lack of empathy in children (applied to private schools)

- Requires a lot of effort and energy to challenge existing norms

- Feeling powerless to challenge these issues

- Institutional culture and the difficulty in challenging them/ Others in the system not responding for various reasons

- Limited understanding of social justice in school system

The following interview quote illustrates some of these constraints, such as feeling powerless in a system:

> 'I also think another huge issue in terms of not addressing issues of social justice as a young teacher, and I'm guilty of this myself, is that you feel, you feel, sort of, overshadowed by, by the other teachers around you, and you feel as if you're, sort of, powerless to challenge what they say on these things (Year 4 Physical Education student).

Some of the constraints include a focus on attainment, which was perceived as being prioritized over meeting the immediate needs of pupils. This was also identified as the major hindrance to effective communication within the school community because the teacher is pressured and felt the need to keep up with good appearances, even though she was struggling with the needs of a child in her classroom.

These examples offer insight into some of the constraints to acting as agents of social justice that were identified by the participants: 'I am not sure of the teacher's priorities because she's very concerned with keeping up the school status and the resources' (response to the Robert scenario, key issue: pupil's shoes not meeting the school's policy, year 4 Primary Education student); 'Becoming too overwhelmed with everything in the classroom and missing that invisible child in a way' (response to the Robert scenario, key issue: pupil's low self-esteem, year 4 Primary Education student).

Concerns were also raised about being able to take action in context because of how they themselves might be perceived. These concerns related to the feeling of being powerless in the system and the influence that peers can have on an individual's actions:

> 'As a teacher on placement …you don't want to challenge them, even if you think it is wrong because they are in charge of it and you want to keep a good relationship. Sometime it can be hard to challenge it' (Robert's scenario response, key issue: Pupil's exclusion from taking books home, year 4 Primary Education student)

> 'As a human being you might want to ignore doing anything as you do not want to be excluded yourself' (response to the Robert scenario, key issue: Teacher's lack of knowledge on pupils' background, year 4 Primary Education student)

Although participants recognised their courses as important in enabling them to act as agents of social justice, there also expressed concerns about the courses being theoretical and sometimes not as practical as the students expected: 'Course taught me a lot about social justice but hard to do in practice... would like more practical advice as well as theory' (Questionnaire comment – No. 143 Year 4 Primary Education student). Similarly, two respondents commented on the need for the course to allow time for reflection and interactions so that they can discuss theoretical ideas in context of real life examples such as the scenario:

> 'In terms of pedagogy I think not so much about being, you know there's a lot of the talk about being inclusive, but…need for more examples – case studies, real life examples, less disengaged examples, more practical than theoretical examples... I think we needed more case studies of things that've actually happened to be aware of the really bad and the really good.' (Interview, Year 4 Primary Education student)

The gap between theory and practice has long been recognised in teacher education literature and uses of theory for reflection on practice has been suggested a way to overcome this gap (Korthagen et al. 2001). However, teacher preparation has traditionally focused on classroom instruction, while other aspects of their complex roles are only sporadically addressed in teacher education. For example, studies found that understanding of education systems (including cooperation with relevant professionals, local communities and involvement in school development planning activities) is seen as one of the least important areas of teacher competence (Pantić, Wubbels, & Mainhard 2011). Preparing teachers to exercise their agency within broader systems in which their individual practices are embedded, involves a major shift in preparing teachers for collective rather than individual practice. Our study provided new conceptual and practical tools that can be used both for scenario-based learning in teacher education programmes, and in future studies of such programmes' potential to shape both student teachers' understandings and enactment of socially just practices (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016).

Conclusions and implications for teacher education

In summary, students' *sense of purpose* by and large involved an understanding of agency for social justice as part of their roles. In terms of *competence* student teachers mostly perceived such agency as focused on classroom practices although they raised concerns about how others in the context of their practice would respond to their actions. In responding to the simulation scenarios, participants elaborated on how they would use their professional *autonomy* in

context-embedded decision-making, and the opportunities and barriers to promoting social justice they perceived in relation to specific situations. Participants also *reflected* on how theory and practice could be better integrated in teacher preparation.

Student teachers' *perceptions of their roles* reveal a great deal of commitment to social justice. These perceptions are likely to reflect these students' embeddedness in the Scottish policy context that explicitly promotes teacher agency for social justice. However, students' understanding of social justice reflected in the nature of actions that they perceived as possible, focused largely on their individual classroom practice. The implications of these views could be considered in teacher education to encourage a deeper reflection and understanding of the complex ways in which social justice issues might play out and be addressed in classroom, school, policy and social contexts. In particular, teacher education programmes could prepare students to systematically explore how different institutional structures provide different possibilities for practice, e.g. through international exchanges or guest lecturers.

Triangulation of data generated by the different tools showed that students recognise powerful external influences on their practices. A broader understanding of the varying context-embedded issues seems to be required for empowering student teachers to engage in a more systematic way with the contexts of their practice, especially with regards to the implications of such roles beyond classroom practice. For example, opportunities for student teachers to work with other professionals and with diverse families during their preparation could be helpful towards building relevant collaborative skills. In Scotland inter-agency work is promoted in policies such as 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (Scottish Government, 2014). Accordingly, opportunities could be created for student teachers to collaborate with students on other relevant programmes, such as health or social work.

While teacher education programmes can and do help develop student teachers' sense of purpose and competence, they can hardly be expected to capture the full complexity of the structures and cultures of the particular schools in which their graduates will teach. A study by Price & Valli (2005) illustrated how two teachers with similar passion and position might not be equally powerful as change agents in particular school environment, depending on the critical support of the headteachers and colleagues. Teacher education can prepare future teachers to consider the different contexts in which teachers exercise their autonomy as agents. In this sense, our study provides some support for the previous suggestions that teacher education programmes need to better prepare students for the uncertainty of future workplaces (e.g. Agarwal et al., 2010), for example by exploring the real-life scenarios that enabled a

deeper and richer consideration of students' understanding of social justice principles in relation to particular key issues. Scenario-based learning can help develop students' skilled intuition through developing situation awareness, understanding the critical cues, practising and receiving feedback.

In research, our tools and concepts can help understand how teacher agency is enhanced or constrained in different contexts. They enable a systematic consideration of the many possible features of future workplace environments that could help students examine the taken for granted school practices and processes, or policies, as well as their own unexamined assumptions. In teacher education, interactive teaching and learning materials can be devised using simulation interviews based on real-life social justice scenarios. This would allow student teachers an in-depth exploration of the thinking that underpins judgements and decisions around issues of social justice. Developing a library of 'tough case' scenarios and responses from teachers displaying varying levels of proficiency in acting as agents of social justice could help to alleviate some of the more superficial approaches to learning about these complex issues. Scenarios could be useful both as conceptual and practical tools to help students make connections between the theory and practice of social justice in education.

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