Social Justice Standards in Teacher Education: Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers' Successes, Struggles, and Futures

William S. Davis
University of Oklahoma
Tonya D. Jeffery
Stephen F. Austin State University

Teacher education has increasingly situated social justice as a critical outcome in their programs. One resource, the Social Justice Standards (SJS), has been identified as a guiding tool for supporting pre-service teachers (PSTs) to plan for and enact social justice-oriented practices in their teaching. Situated in the context of a rural teacher education program at a predominately White institution (PWI) in Texas, this qualitative study explored the perceived successes, struggles, and future considerations of five pre-service and in-service teachers in using the SJS. Findings illustrate students' varied conceptualizations of social justice and their mixed feelings of confidence, anxiety, fear, and unpreparedness to actualize it in their future teaching.

Introduction

Social justice has become an increasingly important focus of teacher education programs and the field of teacher education in the United States over the past 5 to 10 years (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). Objectives related to social justice, cultural competence, equity, and diversity are becoming more salient in standards for teacher education, such as those provided by the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) and Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). More recently, there has been an increase in racial and socio-political tension in the United States and a reckoning for anti-oppressive and anti-bias practices in education. In these unprecedented times, universities and colleges of education have adopted social justice phrasing into their mission statements, course descriptions, and recruitment materials (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021; Cochran-Smith, 2010). Despite these shifts and intentions, teacher education programs face some difficulties in actualizing these outcomes. Pre-service teachers' (PSTs) racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic identifiers do not match those of the students in their future classrooms and schools, and teachers remain largely White and monolingual, while Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and emergent bilingual children now make up the majority K-12 public school students (Taie & Goldring, 2020).

This mismatch of identities and background experiences between public school students and their teachers can generate inequitable school experiences for historically marginalized student groups. Research has shown that White teachers are prone to adopt deficit perspectives, have lower academic expectations, and enact disproportionately more frequent and harsher disciplinary actions toward Black children (see Iruka et al., 2020; Sleeter, 2017). In addition, not all K-12 public school teachers have had the professional training needed to advocate for social justice in their classrooms and schools. A recent NCES (Taie & Goldring, 2020) survey found that only 64.5% of public school teachers had reported taking university coursework related to supporting students from diverse economic backgrounds and only 40.5% reported receiving training for supporting emergent bilinguals.

One path for supporting social justice in teacher education is the curricular inclusion of the Social Justice Standards (SJS) offered by *Learning for Justice* (2016). The SJS contribute grade-level outcomes for fostering identity, diversity, justice, and action in schools and can act as a guide for planning and school decision-making. The standards "provide a common language and organizational structure educators can use to guide curriculum development and make schools more just and equitable" (Learning for Justice, 2016, p. 2). While some research has explored the use of SJS in teacher education and teacher development (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021; Spitzman & Balconi, 2019), little is known about how PSTs perceive or use the SJS in their coursework and when entering their own future classrooms.

This qualitative interview study (deMarrais, 2004) sought to better understand pre-service and in-service teachers' (ISTs) beliefs, struggles, and future considerations in using the SJS during their planning and teaching. We, the authors, are two teacher educators in a rural context who work primarily with elementary and secondary level PSTs and ISTs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The current research is a product of a collaborative project undertaken to reflect on our practice as teacher educators who prioritize social justice in our teacher preparation and research.

Literature Review

The following sections explore how social justice is conceptualized and actualized in U.S. teacher education. Further, we introduce the Social Justice Standards (SJS) and synthesize the findings of two studies which explore how PSTs and ISTs integrate the standards into their teaching and coursework.

Social Justice in Teacher Education

Despite the ubiquity of the term, social justice as a concept often lacks clear definitions in education scholarship (Chapman, 2013; Cochran-Smith, 2010). Social justice is often likened to peripheral terms such as diversity, equality, respect, and fairness (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017), leaving the concept relatively open to individual interpretation (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). For instance, the frequently referenced definition of social justice applied to education offered by Nieto and Bode (2017) as "a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity" (p. 8) may be interpreted by some less experienced PSTs as a justification for colorblindness and equality, especially when comparing it to the authors' explanation of social justice on a societal level:

> This means affording each person the real—not simply a state or codified—opportunity to achieve to her or his potential and full participation in a democratic society by giving each person access to the goods, services, and social and cultural capital of a society, while also affirming the culture and talents of each individual and the group or group with which she or he identifies (Nieto & Bode, 2017, p. 8).

Thus, social justice requires a critical component (Chapman, 2013; Philip et al., 2019). In teacher education, social justice must be conceptualized and enacted in ways that reflect its foundations of structural critique (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and the recognition of dominant identity privileges and inequity of all forms (Chapman, 2013) while moving beyond notions of equality and tolerance and towards action. Social justice

must be threaded through all elements of teacher education, including curricular and pedagogical decisions, the recruitment and selection of diverse faculty, teacher candidates, and in selecting and assessing program and student learning outcomes (Cochran-Smith, 2010).

Teacher education programs have advocated for social justice in various ways, from adding a single multicultural course into a degree plan to reconceptualizing teacher education around the exploration of power and equity (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Milner & Laughter, 2015). Mills and Ballantyne (2016) provide a thorough review of research exploring how social justice has been incorporated in teacher education. Their results found substantial variation across the reviewed studies in how PSTs and teacher educators valued and conceptualized social justice. Further, their review found some evidence that PSTs' positive dispositions and beliefs toward social justice could be cultivated as a result of teacher training, particularly through field-based service-learning experiences involving critical self-reflection and equitable and reciprocal relationships with the community. Others, such as Milner and Laughter (2015) and Sleeter (2017), present evidence that the deficit perspectives of White PSTs are not so easily deconstructed. They, and others (Cochran-Smith, 2010), argue for the reconceptualization of teacher education as a transformative space for examining race, class, and power, as well as long term, collaborative activism and action in the community to truly advocate for social justice in schools. Further, through recruiting teacher candidates of historically marginalized backgrounds and/or those with justice-based and critical values and beliefs, teacher education programs can begin to move toward an applied theory of social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2010).

The Social Justice Standards (SJS)

The Social Justice Standards (SJS) (Learning for Justice, 2016) are a list of grade-level standards and scenarios educators may use to support students in reducing prejudice and anti-bias and work toward collective social action in their classrooms and schools. The SJS were designed by the organization *Learning for Justice* (formerly *Teaching Tolerance*) and are based on Louise Derman-Sparks' approach to enacting anti-bias education. The editing team writes:

> The Social Justice Standards are a set of anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes divided into four domains—Identity, Diversity, Justice and Action (IDJA). The standards provide a common language and organizational structure: Teachers can use them to guide curriculum development, and administrators can use them to make schools more just, equitable and safe. The standards are leveled for every stage of K–12 education and include school-based scenarios to show what anti-bias attitudes and behaviors may look like in the classroom (Learning for Justice, 2016, p. 2).

While the SJS have been theorized and researched in teacher education, little research has specifically explored how teacher education students perceive and integrate them into their coursework and teaching. The two studies which have explored the how PSTs and ISTs use the SJS (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021; Spitzman & Balconi, 2019) have examined how rigorously and accurately students represented the components of social justice and the SJS into the learning plans they designed. Participants in the studies included PSTs and ISTs of emergent bilingual children

(Spitzman & Balconi, 2019) and English Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies teachers (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021). Across both studies, teacher education students experienced some success in enacting the more superficial principles of social justice (i.e., awareness and inclusivity), such as including diverse resources and exhibiting awareness toward historically marginalized groups.

Despite this, the student participants often failed to implement some of the more critical and action-based components of social justice. Students had difficulties creating learning plans that incorporated and further sustained the diverse perspectives, identities, and background experiences of their students (Spitzman & Balconi, 2019). Further, the lesson and unit plans often did not provide space for cultivating learners' critical thought, social action, and transformation (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021). Based on these results, the authors suggest that the reason the PSTs and ISTs had difficulties addressing the more critical and action-oriented stages of social justice, even when integrating the SJS, was because they had not yet had the opportunity to hone their ability to engage in critical analyses of power and inequity. This underscores "the need to foster the development of critical intercultural competence in teacher education courses" (Spitzman & Balconi, 2019, p. 12). The authors suggest a reconsideration of teacher education curricula to not only provide PSTs with consistent, meaningful opportunities for self-reflection and dialogue around hegemony and power, but also to re-evaluate the approach to teaching about the lesson planning process.

While these studies examined how teacher education students applied the SJS to their learning plans, they did not explore their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of using the SJS in their coursework and in schools. To address this gap in the literature and impact our immediate practice as rural teacher educators, we designed and conducted a qualitative interview study guided by the question: *How do rural teacher education students perceive their use of the Social Justice Standards (SJS) when planning and teaching?*

Method

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore how rural teacher education students perceive their use of the SJS during planning and teaching. The broader goal of the study was to assist us, the authors, in developing new understandings of our own practice as rural teacher educators to make equitable and informed decisions in our future course planning and practice.

Context

This qualitative interview study (Bhattacharya, 2017; deMarrais, 2004) was situated within a rural teacher education program at a predominately White institution (PWI) in Texas where we, the authors, worked as secondary (Author 1) and elementary (Author 2) teacher educators during the spring 2021 semester. The student participants in the study were enrolled in either an undergraduate or graduate section of a teacher education course that explored culturally responsive assessment design in the secondary context. Both courses were taught concurrently by the first author through a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In our respective teacher education courses, we had independently introduced and integrated the SJS into our curricula, expectations, and assessments. The SJS were a key component of our courses' curricula, and course assignments regularly required students to integrate the SJS with

state content standards when designing culturally responsive, authentic assessments. After learning of each other's work with the SJS in our courses, we began a collaboration in order to assess students' perceptions of the value and applicability of the SJS to better inform our immediate practice.

Participants

Five teacher education students participated in this study: Anna, Evan, Irene, Thomas, and Trinity (pseudonyms used). Two of the students (Anna and Evan) were enrolled in the undergraduate course while Trinity, Irene, and Thomas were enrolled in the graduate section. Thomas and Irene were high school teachers at the time of data collection. The students' content areas included art (Trinity), English language arts (ELA) (Anna and Evan), and music (Irene and Thomas). All participants identified as White.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews facilitated by the first author. All students enrolled in the two sections of the course were invited by their course instructor (Author 1) to participate voluntarily in a research study beginning in the last week of the semester. The researchers designed a semi-structured interview protocol to guide the conversations (Appendix A). Due to a technical issue, one student (Anna) submitted written responses to the interview questions.

To make sense of the data, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns in the interview data (Bhattacharya, 2017). The initial stage of analysis involved the raw interview data being coded in reference to the study's research question. In this stage, the participants' responses associated with their perceptions of the SJS and teaching for social justice were coded as theoretically relevant. Next, we employed an inductive approach to cluster these previously coded data excerpts into meaningful categories representing participants' perceptions and experiences with the SJS. Further rounds of inductive coding, informed by the literature within social justice in teacher education, ensured a continuously refining and iterative process from which salient themes and subthemes were identified and confirmed (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Results

Two overarching themes were identified reflecting teacher education students' perceptions toward the Social Justice Standards (SJS): *Conceptualizations of Social Justice* and *Feelings Towards Future Practice* (Table 1). Within these two themes we identified six subthemes. The three subthemes under *Conceptualizations of Social Justice* include (A) *Social Justice as Cultural Understanding*, (B) *Social Justice as Critique*, and (C) *Social Justice as Collective Action*. The three subthemes related to *Feelings Towards the Future* were (A) *Initial Failure, Growth, and Self-Efficacy*, (B) *Unpreparedness*, and (C) *Fear of Reprisal*. It is important to note that, although the interview protocol explored participants' perceptions of the SJS as a planning resource, conversations and further analyses turned significantly toward social justice as a concept and an approach to pedagogy.

Before examining these themes, three foundational beliefs were shared by all five teacher education students. First, all of them explained how they valued social justice

Some students, such as Trinity and Evan, considered social justice nearly exclusively in terms of celebrating, recognizing, and sharing diverse cultures and perspectives in

Table 1
Qualitative themes and subthemes

Themes	*Subthemes*
1. Conceptualizations of Social Justice	A. Social Justice as Cultural Understanding B. Social Justice as Critique C. Social Justice as Collective Action
2. Feelings Towards Future Practice	A. Initial Failure, Growth, and Self-Efficacy B. Unpreparedness C. Fear of Reprisal

personally and professionally and that advocating for social justice was part of their personal and professional identities. Similarly, each felt that the SJS were a strong fit for their respective subject areas, although their definitions of what social justice looks like in those areas varied. Finally, all students described feelings of competence and success regarding their ability to *plan* for social justice-oriented practices through the integration of the SJS with traditional state content standards.

Conceptualizations of Social Justice

Although the study involved interviews with only five participants, the students' perceptions of what the SJS and, by extension, social justice looked like in education varied greatly in scope, depth, and accuracy. Three sub-themes were identified representing how participants conceptualized social justice: as cultural understanding, as critique, and as collective action.

Social Justice as Cultural Understanding

the curriculum. Evan, a prospective English teacher, explained that "English is kind of like the study of ideas … we can choose what we want to have our students read, and having them constantly read British literature is not very beneficial to their learning.

It's more important to show a diverse range of cultures." Trinity, an aspiring art teacher, described, "I think I have a pretty well-versed understanding of a lot of different cultures, but not all of them, obviously." For these students, their personal understandings of social justice hedged between the celebration and representation of diverse cultures or perspectives but did not substantially reflect engagement in social action or critical understandings of power.

Social Justice as Critique
Two students—Thomas and Irene— presented social justice from a more critical perspective throughout their interviews. Thomas, a high school band director, explained how he and his students would discuss the barriers Black jazz musicians faced in relation to the privileges afforded to

White jazz musicians. Examining musicians' backgrounds, in preparation to practicing and performing their music, was a valued process in his classes. Irene, also a high school teacher, echoed this approach in her music classes: "Every one of those composers has a story, which opens up an easier way to make a scenario into social justice, many of them having hard upbringings or ways they were treated." In other instances, however, Thomas suggested that he felt conflicted about incorporating social justice via the SJS into a traditional or marching band class because the setting was less intimate than a small jazz group. In this way, Thomas' limited conception of social justice seemed to encompass engaging in dialogue with students only at certain times, but to him did not require promoting social action through music or reorganizing the curriculum or school structure.

Social Justice as Collective Action

Anna, an English PST enrolled in the graduate course, shared the most consistently accurate and critical conceptualization of social justice, recognizing diversity and identity in terms of power relations among groups and collective action. Although she had not yet had the opportunity to teach as a PST during the COVID-19 pandemic, the examples of her coursework she described in the interview were overwhelmingly centered around collective action for social change. Her proposed student projects integrating the SJS with Texas curriculum standards for English included "writing a letter to a government representative, presenting at a local town hall meeting using argumentative, informative, or persuasive techniques, and writing poetry or drawing artwork that moves people into action." These proposed applications reflect her conceptualization of social justice in teaching—interrogating "the status quo in order to bring about positive changes in the world using their [the

students'] understanding of sociopolitical power dynamics … this is social justice at its core."

Feelings Towards the Future

While all of the student participants felt confident in integrating the SJS into the learning plans they created for course assignments, there were noticeable differences in their perceptions toward teaching for social justice and using the SJS in their future teaching with real students. Subthemes representing feelings of self-efficacy and unpreparedness fell along lines of teaching experience, namely ISTs and PSTs, respectively. Additionally, two participants specifically described fear of reprisal from others (e.g., from students, teachers, school and district administration, the community) if they were to engage in social justice work in their future teaching.

Initial Failure, Growth, and Self-Efficacy

The two students (ISTs) who were currently teaching—Irene and Thomas—referred to feelings of personal growth in their ability to facilitate lessons around social justice themes, but only after initial failures and anxiety. Thomas explained, "I think when I first started trying to bring such things up, it was a lot of tip-toeing even on my part." Later, he recommended that new teachers "don't be scared to talk about what may seem like a difficult conversation, whether that's injustice or privilege … and don't be scared to try it again if it's not something that they're taking in." Irene described how she was initially nervous to talk about themes related to social justice that might make students apprehensive about engaging, but that the result was actually the opposite: "It's funny, fear is because you don't know, fear of the unknown, but really stepping out and trying to do some of these new things, I would say it made my classroom better and more

relaxed." While these are only two narratives, they suggest that meaningful practice may be needed to foster new teachers' self-efficacy in facilitating sensitive conversations around justice, diversity, equity, and power.

Unpreparedness

For the PSTs who had not yet taught due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the thought of integrating the SJS into future teaching brought about feelings of unpreparedness, anxiety, and fear. While Evan felt successful in combining content standards and SJS in an ELA unit plan for his coursework, he recognized that putting a plan into action with actual high school students would be a uniquely different challenge: "I was a little daunted by wondering how I would actually incorporate that into the classroom because I feel like some students would be very hesitant to talk about their background." Evan, like many other teacher candidates, had entered the heart of their teaching program amidst the limitations and barriers arising from the pandemic, such as the use of pre-recorded classroom teaching videos and virtual livestream observations in lieu of initial field placements.

Despite her developed conceptualization of social justice, Anna shared a sense of anxiety she was feeling about the identity mismatch between herself—a White woman—and her future classroom of culturally and linguistically diverse students. She feared that the students "will not find me authentic, and I'm afraid they won't connect with me or trust me enough to share … Why would they think that I understand what they have been through or how they feel?" Trinity shared a similar sentiment of reluctance to engage with students representing diverse identities with whom she has had little experience as a White, 30-year-old female. She described unpreparedness "to have those conversations, and to know *how* to have those conversations, and to even know *when* it is

important to have them is something that sort of needs to be talked about more" [emphasis added]. The findings underscore the need for field experiences in which PSTs can build the requisite relationships with students and the community to engage in meaningful and sustained social justice work.

Fear of Reprisal

Another source of the students' anxiety came from perceived friction or fear of reprisal from others at the school or community. Two of the student participants—Irene (an IST) and Anna (PST)—described these feelings. Although Irene remarked that her students were highly receptive to and drawn toward the integration of social justice in her class, she also felt some reticence or even pushback from other teachers about her curricular choices: "A couple of them thought it's nonsense, that it doesn't need to be addressed .... 'If there's not a problem, why are you making one?'" Referencing broader socio-political forces, Anna expressed feelings of intimidation about teaching issues of power and equity in the context of rural Texas: "But I fear that by empowering students I will be putting a target on my back. Creating transformative intellectuals ready to be agents of social justice might cost me my job in East Texas." This subtheme represents another layer of barriers PSTs and ISTs may face in advocating for social justice in schools and communities which may or may not share the same values.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored five pre- (PSTs) and in-service teachers' (ISTs) perceptions of their current and future use of the Social Justice Standards (SJS) in a rural Texas teacher education program. Results from the analysis found that, while this group of students valued social justice and

recognized its applicability to their subject areas (art, music, and ELA), they conceptualized social justice in various ways—from cultural understanding to collective action—and described a range of feelings, from anxiety, unpreparedness, and fear, to confidence about integrating the SJS into their future teaching in socio-politically situated schools. The two students who were currently teaching and simultaneously working toward a graduate degree (Irene and Thomas) shared positive accounts of personal growth in their ability to teach for social justice, but only after practice, failure, and reflection. The three PSTs (Anna, Trinity, Evan), however, had not yet had this opportunity for meaningful, situated practice in schools. Additionally, there was some evidence that the participants' diverse, and sometimes incomplete understandings of the critical nature of social justice and the SJS impacted their ability to enact them accurately and appropriately during planning (PSTs) and teaching (ISTs), regardless of their confidence in doing so.

At the same time, each of the five students felt confident in their ability to integrate the SJS with Texas content standards in the *planning* process, but felt unprepared and anxious about facilitating that work when actually *teaching*. This cluster of themes and findings suggest that the students' successes in accurately and effectively applying the SJS to their practice may depend largely on their prior experiences and preexisting equity-centered belief systems. Anna, a PST, astutely represented this notion in her closing thoughts:

> I feel that professors have mistakenly assumed that students in their education programs come to them culturally aware and conscious of their unique socio-political position. We cannot correctly model or participate in the use of the SJS if we have not met the objectives ourselves.

Recommendations for Teacher Education

The results of this study support the hypotheses and findings of Allee-Herndon et al. (2021), Sleeter (2017), and Spitzman and Balconi (2019) that a major limiting factor in PSTs' abilities to actualize social justice pedagogy may be their homogeneous background experiences and lack of opportunity to engage in critical work during their teacher education program, both in their program curriculum and field experiences. Further, students in this study also had difficulty extending their sometimes underdeveloped understandings of social justice to encompass collective social action for justice in their global community (i.e., the *Justice* and *Action* anchors of the SJS framework). Social justice must permeate the aims, curricula, and goals of teacher education and must be represented accurately—through a critical-structural perspective toward access along group lines of race, class, ability, gender, and sexuality (Chapman, 2013; Cochran-Smith, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017)—rather than as a superficial "buzzword" in a lone multicultural education course.

Teacher educators of White PSTs should proceed with consideration to the realities of their students' developing beliefs and their trajectories toward confronting power and inequity in themselves and their classrooms. White PSTs may wield planning tools, such as the SJS, and other core teaching practices in ineffective or inequitable ways if they are not planted upon a strong foundation of critical and asset-based perspectives (Philip et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2017) and vulnerable opportunities to examine the relationships between race, class, and power (Milner & Laughter, 2015). Pedagogical approaches

such as critical family history (Sleeter, 2015) which seek to make race, class, power, and privilege visible (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020), personal (Davis & Mokuria, in press), and emotional (Matias & Mackey, 2016) may be of particular benefit to rural teacher educators.

By incorporating the SJS into our courses we hope to raise awareness and a critical consciousness regarding social justice and equity in the K-12 classrooms in east Texas and beyond. Teacher educators must lead the charge to promote transformative spaces for PST and IST learning in their courses by integrating and centering anti-bias and anti-racist teaching practices, pedagogy, ideology, and discourse. PSTs and ISTs should be provided opportunities to share their developing personal and teacher identities while regularly engaging in discourse around race, class, and power. Further, teacher candidates need concurrent, sustained time in the field to practice incorporating social justice practices into their lesson planning in appropriate ways in collaboration with students and school partners. Through collective action of teacher educators who value and realize the importance of social justice, equity, and diversity, teacher education programs will be able to counter the power structures that currently exist and impact the next generation of K-12 learners.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell us a little bit about yourself as an educator (or developing educator).

2. How does social justice relate to your identity as a teacher? In what way(s)? Has it always been like this?

3. How do you feel that social justice fits into teaching in your specific subject area?

4. What were your first feelings or impressions when exploring the Social Justice Standards (SJS) in our course?

5. There are four anchors in the SJS: *Identity*, *Diversity*, *Justice*, and *Action*. Did you notice these different areas? If so, what did you notice?

6. As part of this course you integrated state content standards with the SJS. What was your thought process when going about

integrating them in these assignments? What feelings arose during that work?

7. What successes did you experience when integrating the SJS?

8. What struggles did you face when integrating the SJS into the learning plans you created?

9. In which ways do you think that teachers' integration of the SJS into their teaching could impact their students?

10. What feelings come to mind when you think about using the SJS in your future classroom or teaching? What makes you feel that way?

11. What can teacher education programs and courses like this one do better to prepare new teachers to teach for social justice and use the SJS?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add that would help me better understand your experiences teaching for social justice or using the SJS?

William S. Davis is an Assistant Professor of World Languages Education in the Department of Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum at the University of Oklahoma (Norman, Oklahoma). His research interests include language learner autonomy, bilingual teacher agency, and critical pedagogy in teacher education.

Tonya D. Jeffery is an Assistant Professor of Science Education in the Department of Education Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University (Nacogdoches, Texas). Her research interests include teaching science through the critical lens of equity and social justice pedagogy.