

# **Picturing Teacher Agency: Developing Upstanding Heuristics in a Middle Grades Social Studies Methods Course**

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This paper presents a multi-case study of teacher candidates in a pre-service middle grades social studies methods course. The study aimed to understand how middle grades teacher candidates viewed their future as upstanders with agency in middle grades settings. The focus of the research was on heuristic representations that the teacher candidates created to illustrate how they understood their role in supporting the democratic aims of middle grades social studies. Qualitative data was collected and analyzed through chordal triad of agency theory (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The findings indicate that preservice teachers best understand their future as change agents through their role of curriculum and instruction and their impact on students, additionally their conceptualizations of their intended agency were influenced by their past and present experiences as well as their projected goals for the future. This research also suggests that heuristics may be a powerful tool in the preparation of teacher candidates, helping them to think through their role in supporting the democratic aims of social studies, middle grades education and social justice education. Important constraints about teacher candidates' perceptions (or lack thereof) of oppressive structures within middle school settings are considered.

## **Introduction**

As education scholars and teacher educators, we believe in the power of education to transform society. While the structures of schooling often uphold oppressive status quos and limit the transformative opportunities within them, the potential of transformative education still exists in spaces of schooling and these spaces must be understood, supported and expanded. Major Goals of the Middle Grades concept (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2012) take root within ideas of transformative education, the goals of which include fostering student's agency or empowerment to be able to change the world around them. The field of social studies also cites empowering students as citizens who can make a difference in the democracy as the primary goal of the subject (National Council for Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). Taken together, and grounded in political impulse, these goals also align with many larger ideas of social justice education which aim to uproot oppressive systems of hierarchy in all of its forms (i.e., racism, sexism, heterocentrism, classism) (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002; Counts, 1978; Freire, 1970; Kumashiro, 2015; Ladson Billings & Tate, 2016).

The extent to which transformative educative spaces exist within the structures of schooling to meet these important goals depends on a number of factors, but both theoretically (Freire, 1970) and empirically (Dover, 2009), the

educator is a powerful force to achieve such goals within the context of schooling. While much research related to these goals in the fields of middle grades, social studies and social justice education is focused on the agency of students (i.e., Brown, 2009; Hackman, 2005; Noguera & Cannella, 2006), there is limited research concerning teacher agency (Pantić, 2015). We do know that teachers generally report a low level of agency, which is impacted by various educational policies (Swalwell, Schweber, Sinclair, Gallagher, & Schirmer, 2013). Furthermore, we know even less about how preservice teachers conceptualize their own agency before finishing their teacher education program. While many teacher educators and education programs aim to prepare teachers to expand transformative educative spaces within their future middle schools of employment, little is known about how teacher candidates, who are embedded in a temporal space between their lives as students and their futures as teachers, are taking up and understanding this challenge during their teacher education program. This work aims to understand more about how pre-service middle grades social studies teachers conceptualize their future agency.

In this paper, we share findings from a qualitative inquiry to understand how six middle grades pre-service social studies teachers conceptualize their future agency as teacher "upstanders." Using Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) Chordal Triad of Agency Theory as a lens,

the findings illuminate the empirical connections of the teacher candidates' past experiences, present contexts and their imaginations for the future, all as important dimensions of how they conceptualize their future agency as middle grades social studies teachers. We also posit that the creation of "heuristics of upstanding" in teacher preparation spaces might serve as a beneficial opportunity for teacher candidates. The significance of this research is that it provides empirical examples of how teacher candidates' visions of future upstanding are influenced by the ways in which they make sense of their past and present experiences. The teacher candidates also displayed varying levels of ability and/or willingness to engage in justice-oriented issues when reflecting on their future upstanding through heuristics.

This paper aims to answer the following questions: (a) What do middle grades social studies teacher candidates envision needing to upstand for in their careers as educators? (b) What actions do they envision as necessary towards meeting their goals? and (c) Are heuristics an effective strategy for teacher candidates to make sense of their role as upstanders?

### **Literature Review**

In order to better understand the upstanding behaviors of middle grades social studies teacher candidates, the fields in which the inquiry is situated must be known. This includes not only understanding teacher candidates' orientation to middle grades education, social studies and social justice education, but their overall democratic mission as middle grades social studies educators. Realizing this mission may require teacher candidates to exercise agency, a concept which may be more easily understood and accessed through the concept of upstanding and use of heuristics.

### **The Middle Grades Concept and Middle Grades Teacher Education**

The history of the middle grades concept now dates back over 50 years (Edwards, Kemp, & Page, 2014). While not all middle grades experts agree completely on its core features, the majority align closely with the middle school philosophy touted by the AMLE (2012). Two of the four components of this middle school philosophy include equity and empowerment.

These components reflect the grounding of middle grades philosophy in progressive democratic education (Edwards et al., 2014). Given this, various calls for changes to how teachers are prepared for middle grades education have surfaced, just as the promotion of the middle grades concept itself has repeatedly resurfaced (i.e., Alexander & McEwin, 1982; Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller, & Thompson, 2016; Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016).

In particular, there is a need for empirical research that builds towards greater understanding of how to prepare middle grades teachers who ground themselves in the democratic aims of the middle grades concept. DeMink-Carthew and Bishop's (2017) research found that pre-service teachers were underprepared for reform-oriented advocacy and surprised at the political nature of such work. Their research focused on reform centered on curriculum and pedagogy that is grounded in the middle grades concept. This provides empirical evidence that pre-service teachers might be even less prepared to advocate or upstand for middle grades change that is further grounded in more particular social studies and/or social justice imperatives.

### **Social Studies Education**

The subject of social studies is a natural space for the middle grades concept to merge with subject specific curriculum and instruction. In the field of social studies, there has been a longstanding question of how best to educate for democratic citizenship (Evans, 2004). Some social studies focuses on students acquiring disciplinary knowledge, such as U.S. history, and developing disciplinary skills, such as historical thinking, that are assumed to lead to informed civic engagement (e.g., evaluating media sources) (e.g., Seixas, Morton, Colyer, & Fornazzari, 2013; VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg, Martin & Monte-Sano, 2012). Another field centers democratic civic education on the collaborative inquiry of political issues such as elections and proposed legislation, often with an emphasis on democratic discussion and deliberation (e.g., Gutman, 1987; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Journell, 2010; Parker & Hess, 2001). Taken together, there is a growing consensus that within social studies, should the subject be inquiry-centered. Proof of this growing consensus is the publication of NCSS (2013) C3 framework to

guide social studies standards, which organizes social studies curriculum and instruction standards into an “inquiry arc” that centers on questions imperative for democratic citizens.

### **Social Justice Education**

Just as the middle grades concept and inquiry-centered social studies education has grown in consensus, the field of social justice-oriented teacher education has grown exponentially in recent years. Generally, social justice education works to eradicate systemic oppression in all of its forms and enhance equity among various social groups (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 2004; 2010; Kumashiro, 2015; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Villegas, 2007).

This paper grounds itself in an understanding of social justice education and social justice teacher education that aligns with the conception of equity literacy (Gorski, 2013; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) which includes four abilities of teachers:

1. Recognize even subtle forms of bias, discrimination, and inequity
2. Respond to bias, discrimination, and inequity in a thoughtful and equitable manner.
3. Redress bias, discrimination, and inequity, not only by responding to interpersonal bias, but also by studying the ways in which bigger social change happens.
4. Cultivate and sustain bias-free and discrimination-free communities, which requires an understanding that doing so is a basic responsibility for everyone in a civil society. (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015, p. 35)

The cultivation of these equity literacy skills prepares teachers to become “a threat to the existence of inequity in our (their) spheres of influence” (Gorski, 2017). The alignments and connections between the three fields above provides a substantial base from which to understand the necessities of preparing robust social justice-oriented, middle grades social studies teacher candidates to become such a threat.

### **Teacher Agency**

The cultivation of middle grades social studies teacher agents of change requires teacher

candidates to a) align with the democratic mission of the middle grades concept as research suggests they do (Edwards et al., 2014), b) focus on cultivating students’ skills and dispositions for democratic citizenship as social studies publications promote they do, and c) use equity literacy skills (Gorski, 2013) to overturn the myriad of ways that middle schools often fail to live up to their democratic mission or the goals of social justice (i.e., Skiba et al., 2011). Furthermore, such change agents are needed to actually use their agency and *upstand* in middle grades contexts to support practices, curriculum and school policies that meet the intended and vital goals of democracy, empowerment, and equity.

Conceptions of agency, generally, have a long history within the fields of philosophy, psychology and sociology. The primary question of “what is agency” is inextricably connected to conceptions of structure. Questions of agency versus structure date back as early as the Enlightenment in which philosophers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant explored to what extent individuals have freedom of will within structures that create tradition and necessity. More recently, in their theoretical paper “What is Agency?”, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) ask, “How are social actors ...capable (at least in principle) of critically evaluating and reconstructing the conditions of their own lives?” (p.964). Similarly, scholars have long asked how the work of teachers within schools is capable of critically evaluating and reconstructing the conditions of schools and society at large (Counts, 1932; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

A teacher’s ability to act as an agent of change, though, may be impacted by the context in which they work. According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2011), agency is closely related to one’s identity, acting as a way to externalize identity, or express it outwardly. In teaching, this may include directing action to individual goals (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009) as well as the belief that an individual is capable of such action (Danielewicz, 2001). Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) found that teacher beliefs about children, the role of education and the role of the teacher played a particularly important role in teacher agency.

Teachers’ agency may also be affected by the aspects of the school environment, such as school culture and principal leadership (Pantić,

2015), policy and socio-cultural contexts, like the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of the educational system, time and collaboration (Pantić, 2015), and social networks both within and outside of the school (Anderson, 2010). Literature related to teacher agency and social justice is being constructed all over the world, some recent work derives from the UK. This includes Pantić's (2015) theory of teacher agency for social justice, which situates teacher agency "within the complex interrelations of teachers' individual and collective sense of purpose, competence, scope of autonomy and reflexivity, including meaning making of their present structures (roles and resources) and cultures (relational and ideational contexts)" (p. 765). However, Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, and Miller's (2012) findings also question the directional nature of teacher agency in regard to policy, questioning teachers' "Agency for what?" (p. 199).

**Exploring agency through "upstanding."** When working with pre-service and in-service teachers, the familiar and accessible concept of upstanding serves as a bridge to understanding, reflecting on, and navigating the more complex idea of individual agency. We define upstanding, a relatively new term, broadly as "bystander taking action to intervene" (Farley, Gallagher, Richardson Bruna, 2019, p. 3). Since its first use in 2002 (Zimmer, 2016), the term upstanding has taken root in the fields of bullying prevention and social justice education. In bullying prevention, an upstander acts in defense of an individual targeted by bullying, maybe even confronting the individual perpetrating bullying (Olweus, 2003; Salmivalli, 2014; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999), while in social justice education upstanding means to "stand up for what you believe in" ([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)). Though these fields employ somewhat different definitions of upstanding, action is required of the individual upstanding in all definitions. Yet, in much the same way that the literature questions the nature of teacher agency (i.e., "agency for what?"), we have questioned the nature of upstanding and specifically its direction (i.e., upstanding for what?).

The broad use of the terms upstanding and upstander, as they are used in bullying and some practitioner literature, are problematic because they do not specifically commit to social justice, allowing room for upstanding in the name of

oppressive and unjust beliefs (Farley et al., 2019). To address this, the directional nature of upstanding must be recognized as the justice-associated ideals for which the individual stands up. Such framing may be complex, given the contested nature of the term "justice," yet upstanding actions are *associated* with justice, to ensure that upstanding is not co-opted to reinforce oppressive systems (Farley et al., 2019).

What makes someone upstand or not upstand (bystand)? Historically, the decision-making process and action of bystanders has been extensively researched, using Latane and Darley's (1970) theory of bystander intervention. Research employing this theory has identified a number of factors which influence bystander intervention, including moral obligation, fear, lack of knowledge, and the influence of other bystanders (Chabot, Tracy, Manning, & Poisson, 2009; Fischer, Greitemeyer, Pollozek, & Frey, 2006; Garcia, Weaver, Darley, & Spence, 2009; Prentice & Miller, 1996; Schwartz & Gottlieb, 1980; Time, Payne, & Gainey, 2010; van den Bos, Muller, & van Bussel, 2009; Wenik, 1985). Latane and Darley (1970) define a bystander as someone who makes a series of decisions, which may lead to action, in an unforeseen and urgent situation which requires intervention.

Given teachers' position witnessing behavior in schools, and their decision-making process to determine whether and how to intervene, they may be considered bystanders. It is important to note, however, that within schools teachers differ from student bystanders in that they have the power to disrupt what they witness and often are obligated to intervene based on their morals, ethics, and school or state policy (Farley, 2018). When studied within the context of social justice education, bystander action (upstanding) may not be limited to the disruption of or intervention in a specific event. Instead, teachers may identify and continuously work to disrupt curricula, mindsets, biases, assumptions or even policies obstructing equity and justice in middle level education.

The upstander's decisions, however, are not limited to identifying what problematics (Maxcy, 1986) require upstanding, but rather must also include identification of a course of action. In this way, we assert that upstanders must identify and evaluate both their ends and means of upstanding (Farley et al., 2019). This requires social justice-oriented teachers to both identify

injustice and feel that they have the knowledge and skills (Latane & Darley, 1970) to upstand before such social justice-oriented upstanding will occur. As a result, teacher education programs that wish to cultivate social justice-oriented teacher upstanders must find ways to promote such knowledge and skills within their programs.

### **Heuristics**

Our motivation for this work gained momentum through an idea that teacher candidates may benefit from conceptualizing their work as upstanders through the creation of a heuristic that recognizes the justice-associated values they are constructing about their roles as educators. According to Narismulu (2013), the word heuristic “refers to the experience-based techniques that help in learning, discovery and problem solving” (p. 790). While the tradition of heuristics as a tool for problem solving runs far back in the history of Europe (Frank, 2004), much of how we envision heuristics as a tool for preparing middle grade educators to solve problems and engage in social justice-oriented upstanding is built upon the words of Jerome Bruner (1961):

We solve a problem or make a discovery when we impose a puzzle form on to a difficulty that converts it into a problem that can be solved in such a way that it gets us where we want to be. That is to say, we recast the difficulty into a form that we know how to work with, then work it. Much of what we speak of as discovery consists of knowing how to impose what kind of form on various kinds of difficulties. A small part but a crucial part of discovery of the highest order is to invent and develop models or “puzzle forms’ that can be imposed on difficulties with good effect. It is in is area that the truly powerful mind shines. (p. 7)

Problem solving using heuristics in school settings has been largely researched in math and science classrooms (i.e., Chavez, 2007) but has been under-researched in areas of social justice-oriented civic upstanding and teacher education. If heuristics or mental maps can help students evaluate problems and orient actions needed to solve context-embedded problems of math or science, could heuristics also help teachers critically evaluate upstanding action within

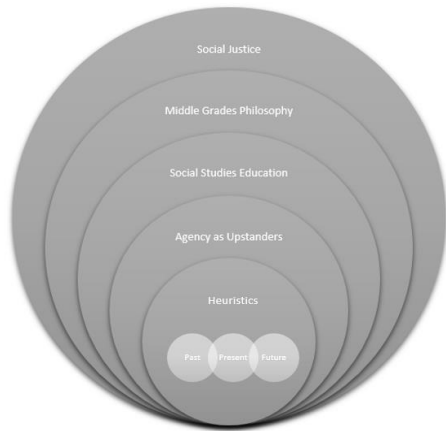
everyday social justice problems in middle schools?

## **Methodology**

### **Theoretical Model for Research**

This research project is a qualitative inquiry grounded in the axioms of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The work also aligns with the conceptions of the qualitative researcher as bricoleur, or quilt maker, who uses the tools and strategies necessary and available to understand the research question within a context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The research was constructed from the foundations of the literature above and the conceptual model below (See Figure 1). Grounded in the democratic, progressive goals of the middle grades concept, social studies education and social justice education, this research seeks to understand how teacher candidates conceptualized their future agency as upstanders through the creation of heuristics. The heuristics, while a learning opportunity for the teacher candidates, were analyzed to understand what teacher candidates viewed as important in middle grades education, actions they should take to meet identified goals and the ways in which they might understand, problem-solve and make decisions, thus “upstanding” within middle schools.

**Chordal triad of agency theory.** The chordal triad of agency was theorized by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to “reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (p. 963). In this research the chordal triad of agency theory allowed us to further analyze the influences and dimensions of the teacher candidates’ conceptualizations of their future agency as upstanders.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual Model for Understanding Middle Grades Social Studies Teacher Candidate's Conceptualizations of Upstanding through Heuristics

### Participants and Context

The participants in this research were six undergraduate teacher candidates in the first semester of their senior year. Five of the candidates were traditionally aged college students between the ages of 19 and 25. One candidate, James, was entering teaching following two previous careers in law enforcement and nursing. All of the participants were enrolled in a social studies middle grades methods course in a large southeastern university and all identified as white. The university has a large teacher education program that prepares teachers to serve in many surrounding rural school districts. One of the authors of this paper was the methods instructor for the course. The methods course is grounded upon inquiry as a stance for social studies instruction (NCSS, 2013) and for teacher professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). The course is also framed through a lens of social justice and organized to illuminate master narratives and support critical narratives within each of the social science disciplines that make up social studies education. At the time of the heuristic intervention that was the focus of this research, the students were in the last weeks of the course. Pseudonyms are used for the participants' names in this paper.

### Procedure

The data collection for this research study took place in one of the author's middle grades social

studies methods courses. In our (the authors') own work conceptualizing "upstanding for justice," we developed a heuristic (see Farley et al., 2019, Figure 1) to account for factors which influence upstanding, or bystander action, as well as social justice-oriented upstanding behaviors, which may ultimately serve as a "flipped" perspective to the Pyramid of Hate (Anti-Defamation League [ADL], 2018). This heuristic was presented to the teacher candidates and they utilized it to analyze cases of upstanding. The teacher candidates later were prompted to create their own heuristics to define their theory of "justice" in middle grades and conceptualization the future upstanding they hope to do in their future middle school settings to support it. The heuristic was part of a larger professional development project in which teachers reflected on their middle grade social studies teaching philosophy, ideals and/or "justice", created a heuristic to represent their future upstanding towards those goals and identified a professional development resource that they believed would help them be able to enact their identified upstanding actions. The project gave teacher candidates an opportunity to engage in a level of consciousness identified by Mead (1934) wherein individuals develop a capacity to use ideas and images to anticipate their future agency.

The teacher candidates used various programs to create their heuristic including Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Canva - an online graphic design application. Their heuristics included pictures, words, and acronyms all arranged in a way that they felt represented the ideals they wanted to upstand towards in their future middle grade social studies classroom and help them to orientate themselves when faced with the problems, frustrations and/or other unforeseen challenges that they may find themselves in while teaching middle school. The students wrote explanations of their heuristics and identified related professional development goals they felt would help prepare them to meet their upstanding vision. The students presented their heuristics to their classmates on the last day of our social studies middle grades methods course.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data sources were collected including the heuristics, presentations, and written reflections. The qualitative data was first inductively coded to make sense of each

individual case using the chordal triad of agency theory with a priori codes of past (iterational), present (practical-evaluative) and future (projective) connections. The cases were then analyzed again to find emergent themes across cases.

### **Findings**

The collection and analysis of this data represents a temporal snapshot of the teacher candidates' conceptualization of their future agency as teacher upstanders. However, it also provides meaningful context-laden connections to their past, present and projected future selves. Therefore, these qualitative findings offer an important application of Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad of agency theory of understanding agency to include influences from the past (iterational), orientations towards the future (projective) and engagement with the present (practical-evaluative). Using this framework to analyze the different dimensions of their "teacher upstander" identities, as detailed in their heuristics and reflections, allowed us to better understand their capacity and intention for future action - given that "the ways in which people understand their own relationship to the past, future, and present make a difference to their actions" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 973). Each case helped us to build an understanding of middle grades teacher candidates' varied and changing capacities for imagining critical intervention or "upstanding" in their future work contexts.

#### **Six Cases of How Teacher Candidates Conceptualize Their Goals and Agency to Upstand as Middle Grades Social Studies Teachers**

The following summarizes the cases of each middle grades teacher candidate's conceptualization of upstanding through their heuristic, writing and presentation.

**James.** James is entering the teaching profession with two previous careers in nursing and the police force. Perhaps because of his more mature life experience, James put a lot of thought into his words, both written and verbally. When sharing those words, it was always clear that James thought and cared deeply about issues of social justice.

**James's projections for upstanding.** James centered his heuristic and reflection on

the future ideals he hopes to upstand towards (see Figure 2). His heuristic centered on empowering students. He also included the goals of "promoting love and empathy," "mining diamonds" (making students shine with self-worth), "give back to democracy," "spark ideas," and "empower the faith in humanity."

I wholeheartedly believe that the time to develop a voice in independence is in the middle grade social studies classroom as the topics covered and expectations of written and oral work line-up with the development of personal democratic value. It is with this realization that I commit myself to training warriors and mining diamonds: hear my words clearly...my job, my passion, and my oath is to develop fundamentally good and well-rounded citizens armed with the tools of knowledge, passion, empathy, and independence. They will learn that their voices matter. They shall begin to discover their value. They will learn courage in opinion and faith in research.

With these words, James was identifying goals for the future, what he hoped to be working towards. While James also named particular social justice-related structural issues that influence these goals in his reflection, such as racism within the criminal justice system, there were only hints he was considering the structure of racism when creating his actual heuristic. Part of his heuristic reads, "As a teacher...You can counter the narrative they [students] have been told" which can be interpreted that James is identifying structural factors that he will need to use his agency to counteract.

#### **James's iterational connections.**

James's lifecourse experience as an upstander in previous careers seemed to embolden him and give him confidence in his ability to upstand as a middle grades social studies teacher in the future. He wrote, "I have stood against racism and abuse of prisoners and suspects and have been disciplined. I have stood against doctors and pharmacists and have been disciplined." And after stating his ideals, he dramatically wrote, "I humbly commit myself under this creed with the same stubborn passion as found in my ability and honor to wear the uniform and gun, the stethoscope and chart, and now, as a teacher..."

**James's practical-evaluative connections.** For as clearly as James was

impassioned by his ideals, his heuristic and reflection did not convey any concrete or specific examples from his present engagement as a teacher candidate or even any concrete or specific actions for the future in order to meet those goals. His high-level goals, although admirable, were never exemplified within the heuristic or reflection in ways that showed he was making sense of the practical dimensions of his experience as a teacher candidate in schools and methods courses.



Figure 2. James' Heuristic

**Lily.** Lily is a traditionally aged, white female college student. Lily was a strong student who seemed motivated by making learning interactive and meaningful for her students. She was preparing to be both a social studies and science middle grades teacher.

**Lily's projections for upstanding.** Lily's heuristic focused on creating a safe place for students to learn and ask questions. She identified her future upstanding efforts towards this goal to include creating a positive learning environment, encouraging curiosity, asking good questions, providing good resources, making connections to students' lives and encouraging involvement in society outside the classroom.

**Lily's iterational connections.** Because of the connection to inquiry-centered science instruction, planning inquiry-centered social studies curriculum came a bit easier to Lily than it did to some of the other teacher candidates. Therefore, it seemed fitting that Lily's Canva-created heuristic centered on creating a safe place to learn and ask questions in her classroom.

**Lily's practical-evaluative connections.** During her presentation, Lily stated that she was inspired to focus on creating a safe place to ask questions because of her positive experience feeling safe to ask questions in the present social studies methods course. Because of this experience, Lily was able to provide some concrete examples of actions that could help meet her goals, such as "asking good questions" and "providing good resources." It is clear that part of what influenced her conceptualizations of her future agency was the way she was making sense of her present context and experience within that context.

**Chris.** Chris was a white, traditionally-aged college student originally from a nearby urban/suburban area. Throughout the methods course, Chris seemed to struggle both with pedagogical course assignments and assignments that asked students to critique or counter master narratives of the social world. However, in both areas Chris improved throughout the semester.

**Chris's projections for upstanding.** The focus of Chris's heuristic was the character of a chameleon and the statement "Be True to You." Chris hoped to support his students in avoiding the characteristics of a chameleon and



succumbing to pressure to change who they were. Chris's heuristic also focused on helping students to "be inspired" and "work hard."

**Chris's iterational connections.** Chris was inspired to focus on helping students be true to themselves and not succumb to peer pressure because the characteristics of a chameleon were how he reflected on his own personal history as a middle grades student. "They are still trying to find their ways but will change their appearance, friend group, and interests to what is classified as cool. I saw this and was a victim of it myself in middle school."

**Chris's practical evaluative connections.** Chris's heuristic also focused on helping students to "be inspired" and "work hard." It seemed Chris was also making sense of his observations at the middle school where he was, during the semester of the study, spending one day a week. He wrote, "With middle schoolers having so much at their disposal, it is easy for them to lose sight of what is important." But these goals also seemed connected to where he was at in his own life during the time he made his heuristic. In his presentation Chris summarized these goals within his current experience using determination to get through his teacher education program after being rejected from other schools. He seemed to want to support his future students in being true to themselves and avoid the barriers and "veering off track" - challenges that he was finally overcoming as he neared graduation.

**Bill.** Bill is a white and traditionally aged, male college student. He often rode a skateboard to class. In fact, Bill's outside hobbies and passions worked their way into many classroom discussions. He was a photographer, artist, surfer, skateboarder and overall creative and interesting person. But Bill struggled with creativity when it came to completing classroom assignments. His focus in coursework seemed to be more about completion than creativity. While, like Lily, Bill also had a science/social studies concentration, he struggled with the "flipping" of traditional behaviorist, essentialist models of schooling to more constructivist, inquiry-centered models of curriculum and pedagogy that were the focus of the social studies methods course. His inclination was always to return back to the direct instruction and lecturing pedagogy he had often experienced and was witnessing in his practicum placement.

**Bill's projection for upstanding.** Bill's heuristic took the form of an acronym to help remind him the work he needed to do as a middle grades social studies educator. Using the familiar acronym KISS, he focused on the upstanding objectives of keeping goals and directions simple, introducing content with efficiency and purpose, staying on track and working start to finish. However, Bill's heuristic lacked any normative values or goals for what he hoped to accomplish in the future with KISS efficiency.

**Bill's iterational connections.** Bill reflected that his acronym represents not just an assignment for the course or for teaching but how he has tried to get through other aspects of his life. "This heuristic represents my lifelong philosophy and then some. KISS has always been the way that I think through problems and problem solve. Keep It Simple Stupid. Where can I go wrong?"

**Bill's practical-evaluative connections.** While he did not say so in his heuristic, reflection or presentation, it is worth considering if Bill's struggle with more open-ended, progressive, constructivist social studies methods influenced his focus to focus on a "back to basics" or "keep it simple" philosophy with his heuristics. He had experienced traditional, behaviorist pedagogy as a student and in other middle grades courses. He was also observing a middle grades teacher in his practicum who generally taught in those traditional ways. Therefore, it seems that Bill's emphasis to keep things simple might have been influenced by the ways in which he was experiencing a conflict of messaging between the social studies methods course and his other experiences.

**Nate.** Nate was a white, traditionally aged college student. Nate was a very strong student and he seemed to easily be able to contribute to class conversations that centered on social justice issues. He was preparing to be both a social studies and English middle grades teacher.

**Nate's projections for upstanding.** Nate's heuristic took the form of imagery, with multi-colored ropes coming together to create a knot. Over the top of the knot the word "citizenship" is displayed. Nate explained the meaning of his image in the following way, "The different colored threads represent the different subject areas involved in social studies: history, geography, civics, and economics. They are all

intertwined together, coming together at the center where citizenship is formed.” The ideas or goals Nate hoped to upstand towards a middle grades social studies teacher were focused on democratic citizenship. He wrote, “I feel that citizenship is the most important aspect of social studies, as everything we do as social studies teachers is to create democratic citizens.”

**Nate’s iterational connections.** Nate did not share much about his past experiences during the course or during his heuristic creation, reflection or presentation. Therefore, there is no data to support that Nate’s conceptualizations of agency were influenced by his past.

**Nate’s practical-evaluative connections.** Because our methods course was focused so heavily on the goal of social studies to support democratic citizenry, it is hard not to conclude that Nate’s heuristic was heavily influenced by the way he was making sense of social studies within the present methods course

he was taking. But Nate also reflected on his present identity and context when he wrote about needing to learn more about the discipline of economics in order to meet his future upstanding goal.

**Allison.** Allison is a soft-spoken, white, traditionally aged college student who is careful with her words and sometimes overwhelmed with open-ended assignments such as this heuristic project. Allison’s future goals included moving on to graduate school to become a school counselor.

**Allison’s projections for upstanding.** Given Allison’s future ambitions of becoming a counselor, it might seem commonsensical that her heuristic focused heavily on developing strong relationships (see Figure 3). In addition to relationships, Allison also focused her heuristic on the context for learning in order to convey how central she believed understanding her students’ context was to meeting their needs as learners.



Figure 3. Allison’s Heuristic

**Allison’s iterational connections.** Allison did not convey any overt connections between her upstanding heuristic and her past experiences. However, her intention to pursue school counseling and her kind and caring demeanor might illustrate that her heuristic focus on building relationships was part of a

longer life history of emphasizing the interpersonal in various aspects of her life.

**Allison’s practical-evaluative connections.** Allison’s heuristic was strongly connected to and heavily focused on her present context of completing her coursework

assignments and making sense of her experiences in her practicum placement. She wrote,

At the beginning of the semester when we began unit planning we were asked to complete a context for learning where we wrote a short narrative about the community, school, and classroom context. This assignment required me to dig deeper into what my students' daily life is like. As a teacher I would like to implement this into my future classroom in order to establish better relationships with my students, coworkers, and the parents/guardians of my students. This assignment allowed me to better prepare for teaching the 5E Inquiry Cycle (Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate). It also helped me to know how to better fit my students' needs when preparing for my lessons. However, I feel as though I failed in some aspects of this due to the fact that I only saw my students one day a week. So as I go into next semester I plan to use this heuristic to help me establish parent-teacher relationships and student-teacher relationships. If I am able to implement this into my classroom as expected I think that my lessons will flow much better than they have before.

The way in which Allison framed her future intentions of upstanding through building relationships and taking steps to rigorously understand students' context of learning was clearly influenced by the way she was making sense of course assignments she had been assigned in the methods course.

### **Cross-Case Emergent Themes**

In addition to the individual cases there were several themes that emerged across cases and answered the research questions.

**What do middle grades social studies teacher candidates envision needing to upstand for?** Each teacher candidate identified objectives or goals that they were going to strive to meet in their practice as social studies teachers. While they were all slightly different, the most saturated theme that emerged to answer this research question centered on teacher candidates' strong focus on their future students as central to their goals for teaching. Additionally, there seemed to be an absence of considerations of structure that the teacher

candidates would be using their agency to change.

***Strong focus on students.*** The strongest theme that emerged from the teacher candidates' heuristics and their writing about their heuristics was the centrality of students to their goals and mission as middle grades social studies teachers. For example, one teacher candidate, James, headed his heuristic with "5 Reasons to Empower Students." Another teacher candidate, Lily, focused heavily on students' abilities to be curious and ask questions when she described her justice end goal of "a safe space" in the classroom. Even in the one of the less creative heuristics, inspired by the Keep it Simple Stupid (KISS) acronym, Bill described the benefits for students first and foremost, "Students perform better with simple directions and a clear goal."

Within the finding that students were at the center of teacher candidates' visions of justice and goals, student development in a number of areas was identified. For example, multiple teacher candidates connected to the progressive, democratic purposes of social studies and the middle grades concept. James included the development of "fundamentally decent human beings and empowered citizens" as part of "empowering the faith in humanity" - one of his five reasons for empowering students. Another teacher candidate, Chris, likened his future middle grades students to "chameleons" in a middle school context with lots of pressure to change and focused on wanting them to be able to fully develop individual identities.

***Faint account of structure.*** While James referred to societal oppressions in his written reflections and Chris accounted for the peer pressures his students would face to change who they were, the rest of the teacher candidates' heuristics barely accounted for the structures that their future upstanding would be embedded within. With the exception of James, no teacher candidates mentioned oppressive structural forces that are normally identified as obstacles to social justice work - such as poverty, sexism, or racism. Nor did any account for structures that might inhibit their upstanding efforts.

**What upstanding actions do teacher candidates envision as necessary to meet their goals?** The second research question focused on the upstanding that teacher

candidates conceptualized as necessary to meet their goals. Again, there was a number of different ways the teacher candidates felt they could invoke agency to meet their goals. However, two strong themes emerged regarding the types of agency the teacher candidates were focused on.

***Narrowed vision of agency focused on curriculum and instruction role.*** In order to enact their various visions of what to uphold for (i.e., empowering students and creating safe spaces for learning and curiosity), most teacher candidates encapsulated their work towards those goals within the curriculum and instruction aspects of teaching. In other words, the teacher candidates largely saw their role in upstanding towards their goals and philosophies through curricular and instructional choices they could make. For examples, Lily identified “providing good resources” as one of the six core components to reaching her goal of creating a safe place for learning, Nate emphasized integrating the social science disciplines to support citizenship, and Bill focused on keeping learning tasks “simple.”

***Relationship building and learning environment.*** One teacher candidate, Allison, focused her entire heuristic on the relationships that need to be developed within the context for learning. While another candidate, Lily, focused on the goal of creating a safe learning environment to ask questions. Chris’s heuristic related to relationships among students, hoping to help them remain individuals within contexts of peer pressure.

***Are heuristics an effective tool for helping teacher candidates think through their role as upstanders?*** In this study, it is unclear if heuristics are an effective tool for helping teacher candidates think through their roles as upstanders in middle grades. The products the students created indicated that there was a great variance in the amount of time and thought that students put into their heuristics. While some reflected careful consideration of their professional goals and conceptions of upstanding, others appeared to be completed with little thought. Additionally, because of the openness of the assignment, it was difficult to evaluate students’ efforts.

Despite all of this, we still posit that the creation of heuristics may be a beneficial learning opportunity for the following reasons. First, it

allows to engage in the process of teacher identity development (Danielewicz, 2014). Additionally, it may also allow teacher candidates to further build capacity for the type of communication that Mead (1934) described as driving “reflective intelligence.” Reflective intelligence, the nature of the mind that is unique to humans, is that individuals can contemplate “different possibilities or alternatives of future actions which are open to [them]” (p. 90).

### **Limitations**

Agency is typically understood as actual action taken. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define it as “social engagement.” This data only represents teacher candidates’ conceptualizations of their future agency and not actual action taken. It is impossible to know if these conceptualizations represent future actions these teacher candidates will take or even future action they hope to take as the data analyzed was collected from a course assignment that they were graded on. Therefore, their grade may have been motivation to report differently than their actual intentions. But through the definition of agency as “social engagement,” the act of creating and presenting the heuristic represents agency in of itself.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Exploring these cases through a framework of choral triad of agency theory allows us to see that teacher candidates’ projections for future upstanding agency were influenced by their past and present experiences. It is fitting that a major theme identified in analysis was teacher candidates’ focus on students. In an earlier study of teacher work, Biesta and colleague’s (2015) “data clearly convey the strong sense of teachers’ professional responsibility towards their students” (p. 629). Similarly, in our study, teacher candidates’ vision for justice in their middle school social studies classroom was largely focused on student-centered outcomes and goals. It is interesting to consider this theme, given the assignment was focused on the teacher; both in terms of teaching goals and their agency. The focus on students suggest that teacher candidates are able to understand the student benefit associated with teaching in the middle grades context. However, this focus on students, including the number of ways in which social justice teaching can support student development, left little room for explicit

identification of teaching practices or examples of teacher agency outside of the curriculum. Teacher candidates may benefit from specific opportunities to connect specific practices and upstanding teacher behaviors to developmental goals for their students, in order to better understand how their actions might influence student-centered outcomes. For instance, teacher education programs might consider exposing teacher candidates to the empirical research on the students' impacts of many social justice-oriented practices (see Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Teacher candidates' heuristics were often focused on curriculum and instruction. While this allowed teacher candidates to think about curricular implementation of their teaching philosophy, and perhaps its relation to social justice-related goals, it was limited in the sense that candidates did not consider how their philosophy would influence aspects of school-wide or community-wide culture or contexts. Two of the participants focused on relationships within their heuristic - Allison focused on a number of relationships in her "context for learning" heuristic and Chris's heuristic related to relationships and identity development among students. We know that relationship building is connected to larger school-wide climate (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009); however, participants provided limited examples of how they might use their agency as a teacher to upstand or advocate beyond their classroom walls. This correlates to research in other disciplines in which teacher candidates have been found to have limited conceptions of their social justice agency (Moore, 2008).

Additionally, the participants identified their upstanding efforts in terms of influences *on* their students in traditional, behavioristic conceptions of teacher-student relationships. However, no participants listed conceptions of upstanding that framed the students themselves as agents *with whom* the teacher could upstand for greater societal causes. As this type of equity and empowerment is central to the middle grades concept, it is worth further exploration of how to provide examples and/or opportunities for teacher candidates to witness or partake in collective and equitable agency that includes teachers and students. Teacher candidates clearly need more opportunities to engage with the role of teachers as community or social agents. Pairing historical or contemporary examples of teachers working with students to

impact larger community change (e.g., Garcia & Castro, 2011) alongside the heuristic development assignment might provide a more powerful intellectual space for teacher candidates to consider their potential for social and/or community agency outside the classroom walls and alongside students.

Future research might also consider the following regarding the findings above. First, it would be valuable to understand how teacher candidates' identities impact their ability to make strong connections to social justice goals, particularly in regard to their personal agency and the upstanding they envision for themselves and their students. This small sample of white teacher candidates provided few strong connections or inclinations to important social justice goals. Future inquiry would provide valuable information about how personal experience with privilege and oppression may influence a teacher's identity as a teacher upstander. Second, additional understanding of teacher candidates' philosophies about relationship building, culture and climate, may help us to better understand the inclusion of these concepts in a teacher's upstanding for justice heuristic. Third, incorporation of assignments, prior to the development of upstanding heuristics, which required teacher candidates' structured reflection around their own middle school experience, present experience as a teacher candidate, and future teaching context may provide additional valuable information in assessing their capacity for exercising agency. This would also allow for the continued use of chordal triad of agency theory (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) in studying teachers as upstanders. Finally, replication of this study with in-service teachers might provide a "real time" evaluation of teacher's agency. It might also provide clarity to the ways in which upstanding identity and conceptualizations differ between novices and experts.

### **Significance and Conclusion**

This research is significant for three reasons. First, it provides empirical evidence that teacher candidates' conceptualizations of their own upstanding and agency is influenced by the ways in which they make sense of their past lives as young people, students, or in other careers. It also provides empirical evidence that their conceptualizations of the future are also influenced by the ways in which they are making sense of their current contexts as teacher

candidates. Additionally, this research is significant because it provides empirical illustrations of teacher candidates' varied ability to identify justice-oriented goals for future upstanding actions. While some were able to identify progressive ideals aligned with the middle grades concept, such as empowering students, providing safe spaces to ask questions, and working against issues of injustice such as racism, other teacher candidates could not, or did not, identify larger societal or even curricular goals which they wanted to work towards. Lastly, this research provides an example of the potential value of explicitly asking teacher candidates to identify future goals for upstanding as middle grades teachers. While this work was done at the end of a methods course, had it been done earlier, it could have provided fruitful opportunities for furthering discussion of "upstanding for what?" in middle grades contexts. Additionally, earlier conversations using the heuristics might have provided teacher candidates an opportunity to think through the potential of structures that might counter their upstanding goals and ways to enact agency on those specific structures. With more opportunities to engage in such normative ideas, teacher candidates might be able to more meaningfully construct roles for themselves as teacher agents of change. Opportunities to create heuristics might provide teacher candidates a chance to explicitly further connect the ways they are making sense of their past, present and future as upstanders.

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