# Neutrality and Narratives: Situating Middle Grades Preservice Teachers in Broader Educational Discourses

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**Abstract**

This paper forwards discourse analysis as a productive way to consider the ways in which the possibilities available for middle grades preservice teachers in justice-oriented teacher education programs are complicated by larger discourses relating to teacher neutrality and teacher education as a transformational narrative. To illustrate this, written journals from 12 preservice teachers in a justice-oriented teacher education program are analyzed and discussed.

## Introduction

Despite decades of research relating to how schools and classrooms can be welcoming spaces engaged in countering systemic oppression (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009), schools continue to be sites of discrimination and marginalization for many students (Carter-Andrews et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014). While "it has become almost impossible to find a college- or university-based teacher education program today that does not have an emphasis on preparing teachers for social justice" (Zeichner, 2006, p. 73), schools continue to be sites of discrimination, marginalization, and incidences of hate (Costello, 2016). This signals the need for more work in justice-oriented teacher education[1] to prepare teachers who resist the perpetuation of oppressive discourses (Kumashiro, 2015). The work of middle grades teachers and teacher educators is particularly crucial in this push for justice because these educators are responsible for working with young adolescents during the years of their lives where bullying can be most prevalent (Hughes et al., 2016). For this reason, it is even more urgent for middle grades teachers and preservice teachers to be committed to resisting bias, oppression, and bullying in their schools and classrooms and to commit to creating positive school environments for all students (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010; Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Despite the ever intensifying need to create more just, inclusive educational spaces, there is no clear path forward. The work is hugely complex and always shifting, particularly in the current moment as both COVID-19 and systemic racism continue to ravage historically marginalized communities (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 2020). As a result, numerous different theories exist for how to best pursue justice in education and teacher education (Dover, 2009; North, 2006). The disparities in approaches for how to best create justice-oriented educational spaces is evident in the very language used to describe those approaches. The complex web of language at play in justice-oriented education is highlighted by Hurd et al. (2017) who "identified over 170 terms to frame and discuss their work centered on educating young adolescents within marginalized identities" in middle grades education journals (p. 31). Of those 170 terms, only 21 (12%) of the terms were defined or cited in more than one of the articles reviewed. Their analysis points to the lack of consensus around what it means to pursue justice in education and thus the space to interrogate what it is that makes justice-oriented education difficult, messy, and uncertain. Many ideas around education in the US are rooted in ideas of transformation, the thinking that with the correct training individuals can move from not knowing to knowing. However, I suggest that when it comes to teaching justice-oriented teachers, the process is not so simple. The aim of this paper is not to propose a correct path for justice-oriented teacher education, but rather to illustrate some of the factors which contribute to the complexity and non-linearity of justice-oriented teacher education.

[1] In this paper, I define justice-oriented teacher education as teacher education which works against the privileging of some ways of being and the marginalization of others.

This study considers the question: *How do preservice teachers use language to produce themselves and students they identify as different than themselves in a justice-oriented teacher education course?* through the analysis of an assignment designed by two teacher educators (including the author) intended to broaden preservice teachers' knowledge of communities which have been historically marginalized. The assignment asked the preservice teachers to research a group of students they perceived as different than themselves and to journal their thinking throughout the research process. In the following sections I will situate this project in the extant teacher education literature, propose the poststructural discursive formation of subjects as a useful tool for considering this work, and present an analysis of 12 preservice teachers' journals to illustrate how concepts of narrative and neutrality are inextricably embedded in the work of justice-oriented teacher education.

## Literature Review

### Justice-Oriented Teacher Education and the Middle Grades

While the middle grades movement is rooted in the ideas of progressive education and promotes supporting the needs of all young adolescents, Brinegar (2015), in a sweeping content analysis of middle grades related research, found a significant lack of attention paid to issues of justice and equity. In response to both her insight and cultural shifts there have been more studies related to justice and equity in the middle grades since 2015.

Doing justice-oriented work is particularly important in the middle grades for several reasons. First, there is the hope to develop "socially responsible and critically conscious world citizens" (Caires-Hurley et. al, 2020) who are capable of creating a more equitable world both as adolescents and as they mature into adults. Further, because middle grades students are developing not only cognitively and physically, but also morally and ethically, they are capable of and eager to address complex issues that relate both to issues of justice and their own lived experiences (DeMink-Carthew, 2018). Finally, historically marginalized middle grades students continue to experience injustices in school. The data in this study focuses particularly on transgender and gender non-binary students. These students are often victims of hostile schooling environments that are perpetuated not only by classmates but also by the curriculum and their teachers (Lewis & Sembiante, 2019; Miller, 2020).

Because of the importance of justice-oriented work in the middle grades, it is imperative that teacher education programs aimed at developing middle grades teachers specifically emphasize issues of justice and equity. This means middle grades teacher educators must encourage their students to disrupt the status quo (Harrison et al., 2018). In her writing on developing justice-oriented middle grades teachers, DeMink-Carthew (2018) emphasized that this work must involve both the development of critical consciousness and of specific teaching skills related to teaching for social justice. Andrews et al. (2018) echoed the need for justice-oriented teacher education in the middle grades to not only acknowledge systems of oppression that exist inside and outside of schools, but also to prepare preservice teachers to push back against those systems of oppression.

This study comes out of these calls to consider how teacher education can support the enactment of justice work in the middle grades. The data analyzed come out of the first course in a four-course sequence for middle grades teacher candidates. Thus, the candidates are primarily working on developing critical consciousness and awareness of oppressive systems. In future courses, these ideas were connected to classroom enactments in an attempt to prepare these preservice teachers to be agents of change in middle school classrooms.

### Innovating for Justice in Teacher Education

This paper considers a particular assignment intended to engage preservice teachers in justice-oriented thinking. Thus, it is situated among the work of scholars continuously working to consider what structures and assignments teacher educators might implement to develop teachers more equipped to address systemic inequity as it manifests in the classroom. The variety and innovativeness of the various strategies which teacher educators use to enact justice-oriented preservice teacher education is particularly noteworthy. The work described in these studies runs counter to critiques that justice-oriented education has become a too-simple addition of a single

multicultural course within an otherwise unchanged program (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2014). In the paragraphs below, I describe some of the innovative practices outlined in the recent literature.

For instance, some programs have paired preservice teachers with someone from a different background than their own. These partnerships include community mentors from historically Black neighborhoods (Zygmunt et al., 2018) and coordinating conversations between preservice teachers at a mostly white public university with students at an HBCU over 1,000 miles away (Damrow & Sweeney, 2019). Other researchers conducted studies that sent preservice teachers into teacher activist communities (Solic & Riley, 2018) or asked them to engage in critical discourse analysis of their own practice (Land, 2018). For the most part, researchers express that these novel assignments and experiences have significant impacts on the preservice teachers. Many of the participants in these studies developed increased critical consciousness (Zugmunt et al.), deepened understanding of how issues like Black Lives Matter might impact their students (Damrow & Sweeney), and began to see "previously invisible systems that impact their students" (Solic & Riley). These results are valuable and indicate that bringing conversations around justice into teacher education could result in meaningful changes for preservice teachers.

This study is situated in this recent teacher education literature in that it examines an assignment which asked students to critically analyze their own thinking and to conduct research to learn about populations with whom they have limited experiences. A limitation of some of the extant literature on justice-oriented teacher education is that the participants intentionally committed to a justice-oriented course or pathway within their teacher education program. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that those preservice teachers were interested in learning more about social justice or more amenable to learning about issues of equity. The data analyzed for this paper does not come from such a program. The assignment I explore is part of a required course for all Middle Grades Education majors, and while the course in which the assignment was embedded is explicitly justice-oriented, all Middle Grades Education majors must complete the course. Thus, I argue that this work may provide a more complicated illustration of engagement with issues of justice in teacher education.

**The Possibilities of Poststructural Theories**

A poststructural consideration opens up and questions common sense practices in teacher education (Kumashiro, 2015). Rather than offering "grand promises of permanent empowerment and liberation, [poststructural theory offers] more tenuous guarantees of constant destabilization and critique" (Prasad, 2015, p. 270). This destabilization is a result of the constant interrogation of language, the way that individuals come to be produced as subjects, and the circulation of power Specifically, this paper draws on Foucault's (1970, 1972, 1978) ideas around the discursive formation of subjects to consider some of the complexities which exist in education preservice teachers for justice.

Foucault famously defined discourses as "form[ing] the objects of which they speak" (1972, p. 54). In other words, he saw language as determining the ways in which people understand, value, and privilege ways of knowing and being. Certain ways of thinking or orientation become privileged as "natural" or "common sense" which means that others are cast out as unthinkable. Discourses cannot be traced to individual authors. Instead, they are practices of making sense of the world in particular ways that become reinforced as more and more individuals accept them as natural or given (Bové, 1995). Further, subjects do not belong to any essential categories, but rather are formed by the ways particular discourses circulate. This shaping is constantly shifting and context specific, meaning that subjects may occupy particular positions in one setting (such as a preservice teacher operating as a student in their teacher education coursework) and different positions in other settings (such as a preservice teacher who is acting as an authoritative teacher in their field placement) (Foucault, 1978; St. Pierre, 2000). While particular discourses may more readily ascribe themselves to particular bodies, there is no essential categorization of subjects (Lather, 1991). Although poststructural theories are, at times, criticized for resting in a theoretical space that is concerned primarily with language and removed from lived experiences (e.g., Wang, 2013), an exploration of poststructural theory demonstrates the opposite. The concern with

language matters because of the way language shapes lived experience. Thus, the ways that preservice teachers position themselves in these journal entries will have lived implications for their practice in classrooms and with young adolescents.

## Research Design & Methods

The data informing this paper come from a larger longitudinal project relating to preservice teachers' ideas around justice and equity in four-semester initial certification program in middle grades education. The research question informing this paper was:

> *How do preservice teachers use language to produce themselves and students they identify as different than themselves in a justice-oriented teacher education course*?

I address this question by analyzing the preservice teachers' final projects for the initial course in their teacher preparation program. The course, which was designed by faculty and graduate students in the department (Hughes et al., 2016) is distinct in that it does not ask preservice teachers to engage in curriculum design or pedagogical thinking. Instead, the aim of the course is to develop advocates for justice by considering the following essential questions:

> *(1) Where am I from and how do my cultural and historical locations influence how I perceive and interact with the world? (2) How will I discover where my students are from and how their cultural and historical locations influence how they perceive and interact with the world? (3) Why is it important for me to consider that we are always participating in a network of systems? (4) Given my evolving understanding of the importance of cultural and historical locations and networks of systems, what actions can I take to cultivate and sustain a more equitable world?*

This particular iteration of the course engaged preservice middle grades teachers in these questions through a variety of structures and activities, including preservice teachers' investigations of their own situatedness in cultural and historical systems, engagement with communities, embeddedness in a professional development school, and discussion of young adolescent literature (Ranschaert & Murphy, 2020). In addition to rooting the coursework in the essential questions, students were also introduced to Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) "Principles for Constructive Engagement," which asked them to consider social patterns and practice intellectual humility rather than relying on their own experiences or gut reactions. The principle which most resonated with these students was, "We don't know what we don't know," which served as an important basis for the assignment discussed here. The final assignment for the course offered preservice teachers several choices for how to address the central course questions. In this paper, I examine one of the options offered to preservice teachers. The instructions read:

> B. We Don't Know What We Don't Know
> For this task you will learn about a group (i.e., transgender students, South American refugee students, rural students) that you currently do not understand because of your specific, limited experiences. You will write seven journal entries. In the first entry, write down your current understandings, biases, and questions about this group. Then, watch/read five videos/articles that shed light on the complex experiences of those students. Write a journal entry about each. Then, reflect on your journey and what you've learned. How has your thinking been expanded or not?

Of 33 preservice teachers, 15 chose to respond to this prompt. Twelve chose to write about transgender and gender non-binary students. The large proportion of students who chose this topic was significant and indicated the preservice teachers' own perceived lack of knowledge.

One factor which may have influenced the preservice teachers' choices was their recent engagement with young adolescent literature through book clubs. The majority of the class chose to read Slater's *The 57 Bus* (2017), a non-fiction text which tells the story of a gender non-binary adolescent whose skirt is set on fire by a Black adolescent while riding public transportation in California. The story traces both teens' histories before the incident as well as their trajectories after the incident. The complicated depictions of adolescence, race, class, the justice system, and gender identities were challenging for many of the preservice teachers who chose to read this text and could

have influenced their choice to continue contemplating gender identities in their final projects.

The 12 preservice teachers whose journals inform this study were students in an initial Middle Grades certification program at a large, research university in the southeastern US. Eight preservice teachers were pursuing a bachelor's degree, while four were pursuing a master's degree. In their writing, all 12 identified themselves as cisgender, white women. Despite this demographic similarity, the participants' individual experiences, placements, religious and political identities, and relationships led to disparities in the way they engaged with the texts they read for the assignment.

After receiving digital copies of the preservice teachers' assignments, I removed all identifying information from the journal entries, assigned the participants pseudonyms, and loaded the data into qualitative analysis software.

I engaged Foucauldian discourse analysis to consider this data. This analysis asks the reader to take the text at its surface rather than engaging in particular steps to arrive at an underlying meaning or intentionality. Freeman (2017) wrote that:

> The analysis works with the tensions and contradictions embedded in competing discourses – linguistic, disciplinary, conceptual and so on – in ways that reveal their workings, that is, how they produce certain meaning structures while stifling others (p. 62)

Thus, I engaged in multiple rounds of reading and analysis aimed at "identifying and following discursive traces [which led] back to the knowledge domain upon which the statement relies for its intelligibility" (Graham, 2011, p. 671). In other words, I examined the preservice teachers' language and sought to identify what ideas or assumptions might underlie their writings, thereby illustrating what types of ideas or discourses were particularly influential for those preservice teachers. I then considered how the preservice teachers' statements positioned both themselves and their future students through language, and what larger discourses may be creating the possibility of the preservice teachers' statements as well as what the impacts of that language might be.

Research in justice-oriented teacher education has been critiqued for being composed primarily of small, qualitative studies rather than large, generalizable quantitative studies (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). Like other qualitative researchers, I contest the notion that generalizable knowledge is an attainable goal at all. In fact, work rooted in Foucauldian discourse "does not seek to reveal the true meaning by what is said or not said" (Graham, 2011, p. 667) but rather to consider the possibilities and limits inherent in language. Flyvbjerg (2006) asserted that "predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs" (p. 224). The study of injustice, marginalization, and oppression and the possibilities of teachers to counter those wrongs is a profoundly human affair. Locally oriented qualitative studies like this one are, in fact, the best way to go about considering innumerable ways that conditions of injustice and marginalization can intersect and interact in the lives of students, teachers, preservice teachers, and teacher educators (Kumashiro, 2000). Thus, while I do not seek to provide a prescriptive path forward for teacher educators, I aim to illustrate the tensions that may be emerging around one approach to justice-oriented teacher education in a particular population. This approach may then be re-made, re-considered, and re-implemented in ways that are relevant to particular spaces, times, and populations.

## Analysis and Discussion

What became evident in the preservice teachers' journals was the way in which broader societal discourses that construct the subject position of teacher and of coming to be a teacher may exist in tension with the types of work and thinking demanded in justice-oriented teacher education programs. Specifically, these journals (which, of course, are not representative of all preservice teachers), suggest that discourses of neutrality and of transformative narratives are powerful in how they position teachers and students.

### Political Bodies, Neutral Teachers

Several preservice teachers explained that they chose to write about transgender students as a response to highly publicized debates over which public bathrooms should be used by transgender and gender non-binary people while others explained that they chose the topic for their research because they had never met someone who was transgender. In most cases, these

explanations were coupled with references to either politics or religion, as preservice teachers articulated the difficulties they had in thinking about transgender and gender nonbinary students in their classrooms. The preservice teachers articulated differing relationships to their upbringings, which they mostly described as conservative and Christian. One wrote:

> I was raised in a Baptist church, so I was raised on the notion that God created us the way we were supposed [to be] created and that he makes no mistakes. From my understanding, transgender students feel as if they were trapped in the body of the opposite sex of what they were intended to be in. This, of course, goes against what I was raised on in the church.

Here, the preservice teacher describes that transgender and gender nonbinary students contradict the epistemology that forms the ways she views the world. Other preservice teachers expressed more complicated relationships to their religious upbringings. Two examples are excerpted below:

> I grew up in a Christian family, so I understand and know the negativity/stigma that are towards the LGBTQ community. However, I don't think the Christian belief shaped my own beliefs on it.

> I grew up in a very conservative household in a small town. I'm sure you can assume why I'm unknowledgeable when it comes to transgender students. I'm afraid to speak on their behalf because I simply do not know the correct way to approach these students in a manner where they feel safe and unjudged.

These preservice teachers describe their upbringings as impeding their understanding of those who are different than they are. Thus, the preservice teachers position themselves in an uninformed space that constrains their ability to act as teachers. In each of these descriptions, transgender students were positioned as "other" or as outside the cultural and historical locations described by the preservice teachers. The ascribing of a political valence to the bodies of transgender students is further emphasized in the preservice teachers' continual assertions that transgender students make a choice to be transgender. For instance, one preservice teacher stated that she had met some transgender people, but "never had an in-depth conversation about why or asked when they decided to change." Positioning gender identity as a choice and a move away from particular political and moral positions opens up space for controversy, which has important implications for in service and preservice teachers, as teachers often attempt to remain "neutral" in the face of issues they perceive as controversial.

Scholars have written about teachers' preference to pursue stances of neutrality around issues they identify as politically or morally contentious (Heybach, 2014; Kelly & Brandes, 2001). This complicates the work of justice-oriented teacher education because while some justice-oriented teacher education programs encourage preservice teachers to develop as activists who question and critique the structures and practices of schooling, some school leaders (the possible future employers of the preservice teachers) view the work of teaching as more akin to customer service, concerned with appeasing school stakeholders, and especially powerful stakeholders (e.g., Dimmett, 2009). While the preservice teachers who completed these assignments used language of empathy for the experiences of transgender and gender nonbinary students, many also used language of concern that acting in ways that might be beneficial to those students may make others uncomfortable. One preservice teacher wrote:

> This is why I'm nervous when approaching people who are different than me. I never want to offend anyone, but because of my background, I question what I say more than anyone could imagine. No matter what it seems like I will offend somebody.

This preservice teacher went on to discuss how there was not much she could do as a teacher to make transgender and gender non-binary students more comfortable as it would possibly make other students less comfortable. Another preservice teacher echoed this sentiment asking, "I understand that they would want to use the same bathrooms, but what about the parents and students who would disagree?" Through these responses, the power of the discourse of the teacher as a neutral figure, one who serves to accommodate all student perspectives is made apparent. This stance, of course, is problematic in the pursuit of justice-oriented teacher education because it suggests that the responsibility of teachers is to allow all students to voice their opinions, even if those

opinions might be racist, sexist, ableist, or otherwise oppressive.

Additionally, some preservice teachers described the difference between who teachers could be in school and who they could be outside of school, describing that teachers could "believe what they want" but must "make all students feel welcome." Here, it seems that rather than developing a more complicated vision of transgender and gender nonbinary students through the assignment, some preservice teachers instead saw the assignment as reifying the idea that the teacher must be neutral in the classroom, even if they maintained biases and prejudices outside of it. This powerful discourse of teacher neutrality is significant in considering the work of justice-oriented teacher education, as there seems to be a tension between what teacher educators are asking preservice teachers to do and what teachers perceive as desirable to school leaders and stakeholders. Particularly notable in this study is the fact that these preservice teachers had not yet participated in field placements. Thus, their ideas about what might please parents and administrators were not grounded in actual experiences teaching in classrooms, but rather in dominant discourses that influenced their perceptions of teachers' responsibilities.

**Teacher Education as a Transformative, Reflective Journey**

Theories of teacher development, both in universities and over the course of a teaching career, outline the importance of a reflective practitioner: one who is able to examine his or her own actions and thoughts, evaluate those thoughts, and make changes to his or her practice (e.g., Zepeda, 2012). In teacher preparation programs, reflection is frequently implemented as a tool to facilitate the transformative process the program promises. Preservice teachers reflect on their experiences as a student, the ways in which their backgrounds may impact their interactions, the interactions they have with students and teachers during their field experiences, and most crucially, the progress they have made on their transformative journey from student to teacher.

Atkinson (2004) asserted that theories of teacher development which rely on reflective, reflexive, and critical stances require a type of transcendence. This transcendent element assumes that preservice teachers have the ability to "stand back and occupy a neutral position in order to make a rational analysis of practice, self, others, or social processes so as to improve practice, modify attitudes or beliefs, or achieve a more emancipated educational system" (p. 381). Atkinson continued that these methods of teacher development fail to account for the poststructural idea that individuals' subject positions are created by the discursive practices in which they are located. Pinar (2004) explained the predicament of teachers as "being conceived by others, by the expectations and fantasies of [the] students, and by the demands of parents, administrators, policymakers, and politicians" (p. 30). If teachers are determined by larger societal discourses, they cannot easily step outside of those positions to engage in reflection.

The journal entries submitted for this assignment were largely presented as narratives of transformation; the structure of the assignment implied a particular trajectory for their work. Each of the preservice teachers described themselves as unaware in the beginning, and then more aware or empathetic at the end. The quotes below illustrate the preservice teachers' narratives of transformation that were consistent across all of the sets of journal entries:

> This video opened my eyes because as teachers we want to accommodate all students. This doesn't mean separately placing them in their own private bathroom, but it means letting them go where they feel safe. I never had this viewpoint on this issue until now, but I also have never been approached with this issue firsthand. I do not think any student deserves discrimination, but now I understand why transgender students deserve their rights.

> Throughout this process, my reactions to the topics addressed changed from more of a somewhat closed minded, yet curious, to a more open minded, willing to learn, and more able to better relate to transgender youth.

> I developed a lot more empathy towards them and I definitely have a better understanding of how they might feel or what they might be going through…I never really tried to understand the other perspective nor asked about one's personal

> experience, so my knowledge was extremely limited.

Each preservice teacher described moving through the seven journal entries as moving from being unknowledgeable to being more informed and more understanding. It seems commonsensical that the preservice teachers would describe their experience of the assignment in this way, as the prompt they were meant to respond to asked them to describe their thinking before the research, during the research, and after the research. Additionally, it was clear from the assignment and from the larger goals of the course that they were meant to develop a more equity-oriented attitude toward the population of students they studied for the project. However, rather than labeling the project as a success because their language points to a marked transformation, it is important to look at the language of the narratives to see how this assumed structure of the text may limit or silence the messiness of learning about students who preservice teachers perceive as different than themselves.

Nearly all of the preservice teachers identified first-person stories from transgender and gender nonbinary middle grades students describing the hardships they experienced as particularly effective in shifting their thinking. While this narrative of transformation aligns with larger discourses around what it means to learn and what it means to be a reflective practitioner in teacher education, a closer inspection of some preservice teachers' language in these narratives suggests a less-complete transformation than an initial read of the assignment may suggest. In the paragraphs below, I will illustrate the tensions within one narrative, completed by an undergraduate preservice teacher who identifies as a white cisgender female to suggest the power of poststructural thinking to expose complexity.

As written, the text presents as a linear narrative in which the preservice teacher recounted her journey from ignorance through an "emotional rollercoaster" to come to the conclusion that "we are all human, we all deserve the same rights." However, considering the writing more carefully, I identified indications in her language that perhaps the story was not a story of progression, but one of stagnancy, and perhaps of repression. For instance, the preservice teacher began by writing that she had "been told that [being transgender] is not right and ungodly, so I have avoided it." She continued, "I am not against interacting or being friends with someone who identifies as transgender. I just do not condone it." Here, the preservice teacher made her stance toward the transgender community clear. While these comments are certainly troubling, since they are written at the beginning of the narrative of change, she is positioned to grow and develop over the remaining journal entries.

In the final journal entry, the preservice teacher wrote that she "started off with strong feelings towards the idea of transgender people" and now "has a soft heart for them." This sounds like the type of journey that someone should go on when learning about the experiences of those who have been marginalized or victimized. However, at other places in the final journal entry, the nature of the preservice teacher's soft heart seems somewhat complicated. She wrote that she felt "anger" because "people are horrible to people when they do not share their beliefs." She continued that, "I have my own opinions on this topic, but never would I step over someone because of their gender identity." Read together with her opening journal entry, what comes to light is that engaging in this journal writing activity does not seem to have shifted her beliefs. She did not feel anger because there are people who believe that transgender people are "monsters." Instead, she felt anger because those people act on their beliefs and treat transgender and gender non-binary students poorly. The progress she tracked for herself, then, is not that she has changed her thinking regarding transgender people, but that she recognized that it can be problematic to voice those opinions because the problems she saw "could totally be avoided if people just minded their own business." Thus, the "soft heartedness" she described may not necessarily be one that seeks to embrace others, but instead one that does not seek to cause pain to others. While, perhaps, this could be read optimistically, and as an indication that the preservice teacher will not enter a classroom and create a space that is hostile to adolescents, the goals of the course she was enrolled in was to help preservice teachers to become advocates for justice, which is not implied by her language in these journals.

The same complication of the transformative narrative that is evident in this particular preservice teacher's work is also present in others. A different approach to reading these texts could result in the coding of these stories as successes for the assignment, signals that these preservice teachers had responded to the

research they conducted appropriately and could now be identified as preservice teachers with justice orientations. However, the tension within the stories, while subtle is also crucial. Thus, it is important for teacher educators who do justice work to resist the powerful discourse of transformation in teacher education and instead consider creating spaces and assignments which engage preservice teachers in the messiness and constant becoming required to do justice-oriented work.

## Conclusion

As discussed previously, the aim of this paper is not to prescribe a particular way of doing justice-oriented teacher education in middle grades or to assert that the preservice teachers described in this study were or were not successful in their work. Rather, my goal was to shed light on the ways in which common discourses position preservice teachers in ways that make engaging in meaningful, decentering justice-oriented work incredibly difficult. While the preservice teachers described in this study certainly described learning new things and reassessing some of their prior thinking, the pressure to be both an activist and a neutral force in a politically divided world led to what seems like uncertainty regarding how to use the work of the assignment to inform classroom practice.

Additionally, the pressure to move from uninformed to informed, innocent to experienced, over the course of a single assignment structured as a reflective and transformative narrative may have silenced the real tensions and confusions that surfaced for the preservice teachers doing this work. Thus, while there is certainly space for assignments and courses that engage preservice teachers in questioning their own biases and assumptions, it is also important to acknowledge the broader discourses in which preservice teachers are always already situated. It may be fruitful, then, for teacher educators to acknowledge and give voice to these discourses and complications with preservice teachers. Articulating the competing pressures that are acting upon preservice teachers, and later practicing teachers, may facilitate more complicated engagements with both justice concepts and justice-oriented practices. While this may not necessarily lead to more direct transfer from teacher educator to preservice teacher, it could allow for more honest, nuanced discussions about the difficulties of doing justice-oriented work.

This research, then, makes space for future studies which further explore the messiness of developing justice-oriented teachers as well as studies which consciously engage preservice teachers in considering the ways of thinking and being that influence their classroom practices.

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