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## Toward a Social Justice Emphasis in Preservice Teachers' Inquiries in Small Liberal Arts Contexts

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## **Toward a Social Justice Emphasis in Preservice Teachers' Inquiries in Small Liberal Arts Contexts**

### **Abstract:**

*Scholars underscore the need to study core features and outcomes of preservice teacher (PST) inquiry. This qualitative study identifies facilitation as a key feature, and a social justice inquiry stance as an important outcome. The author analyzed PST inquiry reports from a graduate-level course, noting that fewer than half of the reports were focused on social justice, and, despite a weak program emphasis, PSTs were adopting this inquiry stance. Analysis of student feedback surveys and instructor notes revealed that providing clear and structured processes, consistent written feedback, and frequent meetings with facilitator and peers were effective facilitation strategies. Additional strategies include teaching research skills prior to the teacher inquiry semester, building more collaboration opportunities, and a program-wide focus on social justice. The author asserts that these strategies could ease reported PST challenges and provides recommendations for developing and sustaining social justice-focused PST inquiry in small liberal arts teacher education programs.*

### **Introduction**

Teacher inquiry, defined as systematic, intentional study by educators of their own professional practice, is considered key in developing career-long reflective practitioners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). The journey toward this “reflective stance” starts during preservice teacher education and, as Miller and Shinas (2019) posit, “It is the responsibility of teacher educators to ensure that novice teachers are reflective practitioners who can critically examine their own practice” (p. 1). Over time, teacher inquiry has become an anchor of many preservice teacher (PST) education programs that seek to prepare reflective practitioners (Rutten, 2021). Through inquiry, PSTs learn to pose questions related to their practice, collect data to gain insights, analyze the data, make changes to their practice, and share findings with others (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020).

While the inquiry process is now routinely used in many PST education programs, teacher educators continue to grapple with how to effectively facilitate inquiries and ensure desired outcomes for PSTs (Rutten, 2021). I am a facilitator of PST inquiries in the Master of Arts in Teaching program discussed in this paper (hereafter, “MAT program”), and I frequently reflect on inquiry facilitation and PST outcomes. I’m especially interested in PSTs’ development of an inquiry stance that emphasizes social justice. The MAT program is located in a small liberal arts college. It is part of the college’s reputable teacher education program (TEP), which has both undergraduate and graduate students. This program has for many years been “preparing teachers and educational leaders who understand what it takes to create classrooms where students learn to engage their world critically, imaginatively and reflectively” (program description). The TEP articulates a commitment to developing teachers who are:

- critical thinkers and problem-solvers
- immersed in knowledge of the subjects they are teaching
- attentive to the cognitive and affective differences of their students
- attuned to the complexity of the communities in which they will work
- reflective practitioners

The reflections by PSTs or teacher candidates (*PST*, *teacher candidate*, and *candidate* are used interchangeably in this paper) are expected to focus on self, subject matter, learning and teaching in the classroom, and the broader context in which they are learning to teach. Developing agency for change as learners, teachers, and citizens of a changing world is a priority in the program, although the term “social justice” is not prevalent in program documents. In the MAT program, engaging in teacher inquiry is considered a part of reflective practice. There is no doubt that teacher candidates understand inquiry to be an intentional and public form of reflection. However, their inquiries have not been previously studied to determine the extent to which they demonstrate critical reflection, which, as explained later, requires an emphasis on social justice.

In this paper, I seek to explore two related areas: facilitation strategies that could be effective in supporting PST inquiries, and ways to encourage inquiries that emphasize critical reflection. I discuss effective facilitation of PST inquiries in relation to the challenges that PSTs identify regarding their inquiry process. With regard to outcomes, I explore self-reported shifts in PSTs’ practice, focusing on those shifts that suggest an emphasis on social justice. Following this analysis, I reflect on strategies that could support a social justice emphasis in PST inquiry in the MAT program and similar programs. The focus in this paper on PST inquiry with an emphasis on equity and social justice is prompted by the paucity of studies on this topic, as noted by Cochran-Smith et al. (2009), Rutten (2021), and Storms (2015). Also, the MAT program has recently declared an intention to integrate the equity and social justice emphasis more systematically in teacher preparation.

I contend that PST inquiry with an emphasis on social justice can help shape critically reflective future teachers. Effective facilitation of such PST inquiries requires that, among other things, facilitators and teacher education programs are explicit about equity and social justice as a desired learning outcome for their students. The next section contains a discussion on teacher inquiry as a transformative approach in teacher education, and underlines the importance of minding the facilitation and PST outcomes while employing this approach. The rest of the paper presents background information on the MAT program, a description of the study, a discussion of study findings, and recommendations for supporting teacher inquiry for social justice in TEPs in small liberal arts contexts.

## **Teacher Inquiry**

Teacher inquiry (variously referred to as teacher research, practitioner inquiry, practitioner research, action research, classroom research, or self-study) has been described as a movement that gained prominence based on the work of Cochran-Smith, Lytle, Hubbard, and Power (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, 1993, 1999; Hubbard & Power, 2003). Noting that teacher

research is not a monolith, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) attribute the origin of the movement much earlier, to a confluence of many “varied but in some ways compatible intellectual” traditions and educational projects in the 1980s. They note,

Ours and many others' ideas about teacher research were first made public at “Teacher Research Day,” a special event since 1986 of the University of Pennsylvania's Ethnography and Education Forum, a conference that promotes conversations about qualitative research among an unusually wide range of participants, both local and national, including graduate students, school- and program-based teachers and administrators, and university faculty. (p. 16)

Teacher inquiry has since become a commonplace term in professional development for both preservice and practicing teachers. At the heart of the movement is the push to reclaim classrooms from the gaze of university researchers and value the knowledge of practitioners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992). Teacher inquiry prioritizes teacher-generated knowledge (both in and of practice) to inform teaching and reform. It is essential to acknowledge that teachers are knowers and agents of change. PST education programs strive to prepare beginning teachers to embrace this role. Such teachers treat classrooms and schools as sites for research, work collaboratively in inquiry communities, and apply critical perspectives on the theory and research of others, while generating local knowledge of schooling, teaching, and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

The 1990s are significant in the history of teacher research. As Willegems et al. (2017) note, it was during the '90s when teacher research became a prominent framework in professional development and school reform (p. 230). Most teacher inquiry work was taking place in structures such as Professional Development Schools (PDS), which supported the simultaneous renewal of in-service (IS) and preservice teacher education. For example, analysis by Willegems et al. (2017) focused on 14 studies published between 1993 and 2013 that examined the effects of collaborative teacher research between IS teachers and PSTs, some of them in PDS contexts. Willegems et al. (2017) reported that findings pointed to “preliminary evidence of the benefit of collaborative teacher research for pre-service teachers to improve their knowledge and attitudes towards: (1) collaboration, (2) reflection, (3) inquiry, and (4) student-centred teaching” (p. 242). They found that effects on pupil learning are the least studied among preservice and in-service teachers, and they noted a lack of studies on teacher educators involved in collaborative teacher inquiry.

Not all PST inquiries occur within formal collaborative frameworks between IS and PS teachers. Rutten (2021) analyzed 35 studies on teacher research as professional development or learning for PSTs published in journal articles between 2013 and 2019. Some of the studies involved broader conceptions of collaboration, including peer and other on-campus collaborations. Findings showed two broad areas for studying PST inquiries: core features of teacher inquiry and outcomes for PSTs. Rutten reported that, in the literature he reviewed, “process orientation, collaboration, reflection, dedicated time, and skilled facilitation were identified as core features of practitioner inquiry” (p. 1). Salient outcomes for PSTs reported in the literature included improved research knowledge and enhanced skills in collaboration,

reflection, and content instruction. Additional outcomes were increased focus on student characteristics and needs, as well as PSTs developing as change agents for social justice (p. 8).

Conceptualizing the literature on PST inquiry in the two broad areas suggested by Rutten (2021) clarifies the rapidly growing literature on this topic. The following subsections discuss facilitation as a core feature of PST inquiry and inquiry stance as a key PST outcome, while underlining connections to the study discussed in this paper.

### ***Facilitation as a Core Feature of Preservice Teacher Inquiry***

The role of teacher educators as facilitators of PST inquiries is widely discussed in the literature, in terms of their skills, collaboration, modeling, and ability to create dedicated time for PST inquiry (Rutten, 2021). An important skill of facilitators is their ability to help PSTs approach inquiry as a process. Miller and Shinas' (2019) definition of teacher inquiry as a systematic, recursive, and reflective process designed to examine one's own practice (p. 16) aptly summarizes this process orientation. To be faithful to the process, facilitators tend to use program-generated models or published handbooks that clearly outline the process for PSTs. Examples of published sources include *The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher-Researchers* (Hubbard & Power, 2003) and *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn through Practitioner Inquiry* (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). The MAT program discussed in this paper has found *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research* to be especially user friendly in the ways it helps candidates understand the steps in the process while offering detailed illustrations of inquiries conducted by teachers. The text also conceptualizes teaching as inquiry and teacher inquiry as a systematic, recursive, and reflective process.

According to available literature, finding dedicated time for PSTs to train for and engage in inquiry is a key aspect of the facilitator's role (Rutten, 2021). When facilitators are working within PST education programs that consider teacher inquiry an effective tool for reflection, time for inquiry is usually built into the design of the program. Some programs provide two semesters of exposure, while in other programs PSTs engage in inquiry for one semester. Prolonged exposure to teacher inquiry is reported to have many benefits. However, the reality of many PST education programs is such that most teacher inquiry is conducted during just one semester, alongside the clinical internship. Short durations for inquiries can exacerbate PSTs' stress and may interfere with development of an inquiry stance.

Another challenge associated with short-duration programs is lack of adequate time to foster collaborative environments for inquiry among PSTs and other collaborators. Facilitators in two-semester programs report sustained success in this goal. For example, Aras (2021) described action research spanning two semesters, starting with pre-practicum field experience and lasting until the end of the clinical internship. Aras reported that PSTs gained ease with the collaborative inquiry process from prolonged exposure: "Collaborative action research during field experiences helped preservice teachers observe themselves critically, engage interaction with children, engage in professional dialogue with peers and the teacher educator, and learn from collaboration and feedback" (p. 164). In the absence of prolonged exposure afforded by year-

long courses, facilitators of one-semester inquiries must be creative and resourceful in addressing the myriad challenges experienced by PSTs during teacher inquiry.

Irrespective of program contexts, skilled facilitators model the systematic and reflective nature of teaching by engaging in “inquiry on inquiry” (Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Friedman, & Pine, 2009; Rutten, 2021), where they study PSTs’ inquiries and their own facilitation of the inquiries. In large teacher education programs, PSTs are usually organized into teams, and each team is assigned a facilitator. Facilitators can plan the facilitation collaboratively and work together to support PSTs throughout the inquiry process. For example, in their 2021 paper, Idris et al. studied collaboration among facilitators of teacher inquiry and reported that the teacher educators “formed a community of practice, allowing them to model the ‘critical qualities of commitment, collaboration, and concretization’” (p. 16). Smaller PST education programs, such as the MAT program described here, tend to have a single facilitator working with a small group of PSTs. In such contexts, inquiry on the facilitator's own practice, as well as teacher candidate inquiries, becomes even more critical for the facilitator and the program. The current study informs facilitation by discussing how one might address challenges that PSTs face in the teacher inquiry process. A related focus of this study involves an exploration on how to support PSTs to develop an inquiry stance that has a social justice emphasis.

### ***Developing an Inquiry Stance as a Preservice Teacher Outcome***

PST outcomes are widely reported in the literature, as illustrated by the reviews discussed in the previous section (Willegems et al., 2017; Rutten, 2021). Such outcomes relate to increased knowledge and skill development in research and collaboration, enhanced self-efficacy and competence as instructors, and increased attention to reflection. Additional studies not included in these two comprehensive reviews have reported similar findings related to PST outcomes. For example, Aras (2020) found that action research increased PSTs’ “tendency to adapt their activity plans according to children’s interest[s]” (p. 159). Miller and Shinas (2019) reported that state-defined teacher competencies accrued to PSTs from their participation in an inquiry project during a semester-long practicum. The state competencies included lesson planning, adjustment to practice, meeting diverse needs, safe learning environments, high expectations, and reflective practice. The authors concluded that engaging in inquiry allowed teacher candidates to develop and demonstrate progress toward some of these competencies while developing a “reflective, inquiry-based stance” (p. 13).

Many studies report that PSTs can develop an inquiry stance from engagement in teacher inquiry. Foremost, an inquiry stance is an identity, as Manfra (2019) asserts: “Through the process of engaging in action research, inquiry becomes a part of the identity of the teacher—teaching *is* inquiry” (p. 166). According to Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020), “This stance becomes professional positioning, owned by the teacher, where questioning one’s own practice becomes part of the teacher’s work and eventually a part of the teaching culture” (p. 11). Teaching as inquiry calls for PSTs to become comfortable with the recursive nature of teacher inquiry, which involves engaging in, as Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) explain, a “repeated, almost unending process of asking questions, looking carefully at the data of practice, altering practice based on new insights, asking new questions, and so on” (p. 27). It is a “critical habit of mind that informs professional work in all its aspects” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121).

An inquiry stance regarding the practical concerns of teaching and learning can be relatively easy to develop; however, teacher inquiry is “sometimes, but not always, explicitly linked to larger social justice and social equity agendas” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). Increasingly, the limited emphasis on critical or social justice in PST inquiries is highlighted as a concern in teacher education. Rutten (2021) found that although many studies analyzed “advanced claims about PSTs’ development as socially just teachers, the papers provided inconsistent evidence for practitioner inquiry’s role in this development” (p. 9). Manfra (2019) has underscored that a focus on both areas is necessary, since the reality of classroom life is “mutually steeped in practical and critical concerns” (p. 167).

PSTs’ identity as critical agents of change for social justice begins to take shape when teacher candidates systematically and intentionally investigate the practical concerns of teaching and learning, as well as the cultural, institutional, and systemic factors that may affect schooling. Teacher candidates also begin to understand the classrooms and schools where they work as being intricately situated within broader contexts. Storms (2015) explains,

Teacher candidates who conduct critical AR [action research] use inquiry to understand how schooling and schools can interfere with marginalized groups’ ability to be successful academically, connect classroom level experiences to broader social and political issues (Daoud, 2010), and engage in actions to remove those barriers. (p. 159)

PSTs are also expected to link their inquiry work to larger groups and social movements and their quests to interrogate structural inequalities, foster democracy, promote the empowerment of the marginalized, and ensure equitable schooling (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Manfra, 2009, 2019; Storms, 2015).

In sum, the social justice focus in teacher inquiry features explorations of identity, voice, power relations, institutional factors, and broader sociopolitical issues as these relate to schooling. Identity and voice require that attention is directed to how social identities (e.g., gender, race, language, ability, and sexual orientation) interact with learning and teaching. Institutional factors include school policies and practices that may affect student outcomes, while systemic factors encompass broader societal influences on schooling. According to Storms (2015), purposes for exploration in these areas include “emancipatory and practical.” Practical reasons are “to increase [PST] self-knowledge to improve their practice,” and emancipatory reasons entail “a critical view of the cultural, social, political, and economic factors that influence unjust policies and practices in schools and schooling” (p. 163).

The study described in this paper had two related goals. It sought to understand facilitation strategies that support candidates in their teacher inquiry process by paying attention to the challenges they articulated. The study also examined shifts in PST practices reported in their inquiries, and the extent to which they suggested a critical or social justice inquiry stance. The study background is followed by a statement of the research questions and a description of data collection and analysis. The findings of the study inform the subsequent discussion on supporting a social justice emphasis in PST inquiry.

## **The Study**

### ***Background***

The MAT program considered in the current study usually enrolls fewer than 10 students each year. The program begins in the summer with exposure to education courses and field experiences, followed by a fall semester with more education and teaching methods courses with a companion supervised pre-practicum experiences. The program ends with a spring semester clinical internship in K-12 schools and the capstone seminar. Those seeking licensure are endorsed to receive the initial teaching license from the state. While most MAT candidates follow this sequence of courses and field experiences to graduate within three semesters, a small number take longer to complete the program. This option is occasionally provided for a few teachers of record who join the program seeking a master's degree or to fulfil their professional license requirements, or both.

The theory-practice nexus and reflection are emphasized throughout MAT study. In recent years, in line with the program's emphasis on reflective practice, each student enrolled in the capstone is required to complete a teacher inquiry project. Everyone in the teacher inquiry course is expected to investigate issues related to their practice or placement site using a problem-posing approach (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). As mentioned earlier, PSTs are encouraged to be reflective about themselves as emerging teachers, as well as about classroom practices, curriculum, student learning, and the school and broader contexts in which they are learning to teach.

There is one assigned instructor for the capstone course. I was involved in the capstone course during the spring semesters of three academic years (2020-2022), a period characterized by nation-wide and global challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic. In spring 2020, I shadowed the instructor who, a few years earlier, had originated the idea of focusing the capstone on teacher inquiry. In subsequent years, I taught the course and facilitated PST inquiry projects.

PST inquiry facilitation in the course begins with a discussion of teacher inquiry as a genre in educational research. It focuses on the discussion of individual and group activities around the various aspects of the inquiry process: posing questions related to practice, collecting and analyzing data, considering implications for practice, and sharing projects with peers. Each PST is required to complete the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) course in research. The instructor obtains a blanket Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for each capstone seminar. Candidates are expected to center their inquiries on issues of interest to them that relate to their teaching and practicum site. They receive support from peers and the instructor during weekly class sessions organized around the aspects of the inquiry process mentioned above.

### ***Research Questions***

Two main research questions guided the study:

1. What facilitation strategies support PSTs in their teacher inquiry process?



2. How do shifts (if any) in PSTs' practices as a result of engaging in teacher inquiry suggest an emphasis on equity and social justice?

To address the first question, I paid attention to the challenges related to the teacher inquiry process that were reported by PSTs. In this paper, my reflections on facilitation are organized around each challenge or related challenges. To guide the exploration of the second question, I considered which foci or "passions" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020) were represented in the inquiries conducted by the PSTs, as well as what facilitation strategies could support shifts toward PST inquiries emphasizing social justice. Only those PST inquiries that prioritized equity and social justice are discussed in detail

### ***Data Collection***

Collected data included course feedback surveys, facilitator's observation notes, and candidates' teacher inquiry reports. Two types of course feedback surveys were used as data sources. The first was the regular course feedback survey administered by the college, which students are expected to complete at the end of each semester. Five anonymous course critiques from two of the cohorts ( $n = 13$ ) were submitted, and these served as an important source of data. In addition, a brief survey was administered to one cohort ( $n = 7$ ), in which PSTs shared their experience of the teacher inquiry process, challenges they encountered, strategies that worked for them, and benefits of teacher inquiry. Facilitator notes, a third source of data, were taken during two semesters, when I served as the facilitator of PST inquiries. Lastly, all teacher inquiry reports submitted by three cohorts during 2020-2022 ( $n = 21$ ) were analyzed in this study to determine the ones that had an emphasis on social justice.

### ***Data Analysis***

Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) was used for this study in two phases. The first phase of analysis examined challenges PSTs encountered while engaging in the inquiry process, as well as views on the facilitation strategies. Course feedback surveys and facilitator notes were analyzed in this phase. Data were coded according to two predetermined categories: challenges relating to teacher inquiry and facilitation strategies considered helpful. Words and expressions related to these two categories were extracted from each source and then collapsed into broader categories. As Elo & Kyngäs note, the aim of content analysis is to "attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon, and the outcome of the analysis is concepts or categories describing the phenomenon (p. 108).

The second phase of content analysis involved 21 PST inquiry reports. The reports were coded for the following categories: title, research question(s), data sources, data analysis, and implications. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) note, qualitative analysis allows for "the subjective interpretation of content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). Matrices were constructed to identify patterns in each of the categories mentioned. The main goal in this data analysis phase was to determine which inquiries represented the social justice focus or passion. A priori codes that aligned with the eight passions proposed by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020) were applied: child, curriculum, content knowledge, teaching strategies/techniques, beliefs about practice, personal/professional

identities, equity/social justice, and context. I read each inquiry report several times and emerging themes in each of these categories were highlighted. These were combined and refined as needed with each reading. Each report was between 20 and 50 double-spaced pages, including appended materials, totalling over 700 pages. Excerpts from the reports were extracted to illustrate the major themes resulting from this iterative process of data analysis. Table 1 in the Findings section summarizes the frequency for each passion represented in PST inquiries. In each inquiry report and across inquiries, special attention was also paid to expressions of shifts in candidates' thinking and practices that suggested development of teacher inquiry stance.

## **Findings**

This section discusses the findings relating to the two main questions guiding the study.

### ***Challenges and Related Facilitation Strategies***

Establishing the challenges that PSTs reported about the inquiry process helped address the first research question, which was about facilitation strategies. Based on the survey and anonymous course evaluations, the three main challenges included overwhelm, time management issues, and limited research competence. Drawing from facilitators' notes and PST responses in course feedback surveys, relevant facilitation strategies are discussed for each challenge.

**Overwhelmed.** The PSTs, all of whom were engaging in teacher inquiry for the first time, found the teacher inquiry process overwhelming. Three out of five candidates who responded to this question in the survey used the terms “overwhelmed” and “intimidating” to describe their experience. Additional related words used in other data sources included “stressful” and “difficult.” Whether these feelings subside may be determined by the quality of facilitation available to candidates. As facilitator, I found that clarifying the process early in the semester helped ease these feelings. Moving the focus away from grading was also helpful. Emphasizing that work completed in preparation for the teacher inquiry report would not be graded and would be revised throughout the semester curbed some of the apprehension. Class meetings helped by focusing on particular aspects of the inquiry process: research questions, literature review, ethical conduct, data collection, data analysis, and presentation. Teacher candidates who embraced the structure reported fewer feelings of overwhelm. One candidate illustrated this when she noted that, “The process seems more overwhelming than it actually is. Because there are so many clear steps, I am sure the process will feel a lot better for me in the future” (survey response).

**Time Management Challenges.** Teacher candidates are expected to simultaneously determine their research interest and focus, conduct their research, learn about the teacher inquiry process, and engage full-time in student teaching. Insufficient time to attend to this daunting list was a challenge reported by many PSTs. One candidate summed it up when she observed, “I was already so stressed and busy trying to plan lessons every day, and sometimes the teacher inquiry felt like too much” (survey response). Candidates found group meetings with the facilitator helpful; they met for two and a half hours each week and received support on their teacher inquiry projects. When candidates missed a session, they easily fell behind their peers

and had to find time to meet individually with the facilitator to catch up. While I provided clear timelines and class sessions organized around key elements of the teacher inquiry process, some students continued to struggle with time management; this was mostly due to the demands of their clinical internship.

Additional PST views on how to deal with time constraints included starting the project and quickly focusing on a challenge worth exploring, narrowing the scope of inquiry, sticking to timelines provided by the facilitator, and ensuring data collection was specific and manageable within the available timeframe. One PST shared how writing to herself could be useful: “Write to yourself. Before you start your inquiry, brainstorm and freewrite to better understand what issues are truly meaningful and engaging to you” (survey response). Some candidates proposed that the inquiry process start during the pre-practicum, so it lasts two semesters; this might address time management challenges. As mentioned earlier, programs with a two-semester inquiry process allow students time to learn about the process, conduct a literature review, and determine their research question during the first semester, leaving ample time in the second semester for data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and public presentations (Aras, 2021; Ryan, 2021). As a facilitator in a one-semester inquiry course, I have noticed that prior research experience makes a difference in the confidence levels of PSTs.

**Research Competence.** Many PSTs expressed a lack of confidence, especially when it came to data analysis. One candidate illustrated this challenge when she noted that “The biggest challenge for me was analyzing and classifying data. Once I had all the information, I didn't know what to do with it” (survey response). For some, challenges related to data analysis skills led to a feeling of isolation and a yearning for more collaboration with peers. One candidate noted, “I think it would be helpful to have a class where you exchange data with a classmate and then have the classmate analyze your data” (survey response). Some candidates who continued to struggle with formative and summative data analysis benefited from extra support, including frequent and timely feedback from the facilitator and peers. Many candidates conveyed an appreciation for this; one PST urged the facilitator to “keep giving great feedback throughout the process.” Comments on the “memo to myself”—written and posted by each candidate to the online class forum—were particularly useful to those who needed additional support. According to Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020), “a benefit of writing memos as you analyze your data is that they can be shared with other teacher researchers so your colleagues can in turn provide their insights into the ways you are thinking about your data” (p. 190). Candidates were expected to bring these memos to classroom discussions, allowing PSTs to work through challenges together. This collaborative strategy helped foster a safe and rigorous learning community.

In sum, the strategies that were useful for facilitating PST inquiry included providing a clear and structured process, de-emphasizing grades, holding frequent meetings with the instructor and with peers, and providing frequent feedback. Additional strategies based on comments by PSTs included teaching research strategies prior to the teacher inquiry semester, creating a buddy system, and building more opportunities for collaboration with peers, especially during data collection and analysis. Some of these strategies, as discussed later in the paper, may require program-wide changes.

### *PST Inquiries with a Social Justice Emphasis*

The second study finding relates to the second research question, which was about PST inquiries that emphasized social justice. To isolate inquiries with this focus, it was necessary to explore the foci or passions represented in the 21 PST inquiries analyzed for this study.

**Passions Represented in PST Inquiries.** Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020) describe eight passions that result from felt difficulties or dilemmas related to the complexity of teachers' work. They explain that passions are best understood as “triggers” for exploring dilemmas that teachers face, which in turn are conveyed in teacher “wonderings” (research questions). They acknowledge that passions do overlap and that an inquiry question can intersect with several passions (pp. 26–28). Table 1 presents the passions represented in the PST research questions.

Overlapping passions were tallied separately. For example, the following were the research questions by one teacher candidate: “How can I grade equitably and accurately in my classes? What grading strategies will enable me to grade accurately and equitably? What limitations to grading accurately and equitably will I encounter as I begin to implement new strategies?” This set of questions would be coded for two passions: “desire to improve or experiment with teaching strategies/techniques” and “advocating for equity and social justice.”

**Table 1**  
*Passions Represented in 21 PST Inquiries*

Passion	Frequency
Helping a specific learner or learners or seeking to understand the impact of teaching/school on learners	8
Desire to improve or enrich curriculum	2
Focus on developing content knowledge	4
Desire to improve or experiment with teaching strategies/techniques	12
Desire to explore the relationship between beliefs and their classroom practice	7
Intersection of personal/professional identities	3
Advocating for equity and social justice	8
Focus on understanding the teaching and learning contexts	8

Slightly more than half ( $n = 12$ ) of the 21 inquiries examined reflected the *desire to improve or experiment with teaching strategies/techniques* passion. Three passions tied for the second highest represented passion: *understanding the teaching and learning contexts*, *helping specific*

*children or seeking to understand the impact of teaching on one or more children, and advocating for equity and social justice.* Least-represented passions were *desire to improve content knowledge or curriculum and intersection of personal and professional identities.* For many PST inquiries, more than one passion was represented. All the candidates who conducted inquiry on their own teaching reported some shift in their thinking, practice, or both—irrespective of their passions. The following section discusses the shifts reported by eight teacher candidates whose inquiries were coded for the “equity and social justice” passion.

**Advocating for Equity and Social Justice.** While the *advocating for the equity and social justice* passion was identified in only eight of the 21 PST inquiries examined, this focus is discussed here for two reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, the equity and social justice outcome is not widespread in the literature on PST outcomes associated with teacher inquiry. Second, faculty in the MAT program in the current study want to include an emphasis on equity and social justice more intentionally and systematically. This study may supply insights that could inform this anticipated curriculum intervention.

An examination of the eight inquiries showed that candidates’ focus was mainly on practical classroom issues, but it was augmented by concerns about equity, social identity, and advocacy. The following example illustrates how one candidate's interest in assessment included a concern for equity. She noted, “As a teacher invested in creating [an] anti-racist curriculum and more equitable classrooms, I believe it is extremely important to think about why and how we go about evaluating student work.” She further stated,

I had a clear understanding of what an accurate and equitable grading system would achieve. However, . . . I was unclear about . . . what grading strategies and approaches would secure this outcome. Now, at the end of my inquiry I have a much clearer idea about what grading should accomplish, and what strategies will help me make grading more equitable and accurate in my classes. (Inquiry report)

Another self-identified antiracist PST exhibited attention to social identities in her thinking about classroom strategies. She castigated herself for failing to address what she considered a teachable moment, when a child shared with the class about a racist interaction that she and her mother had experienced while shopping. The PST noted, “I should have taken advantage of this moment and spoken up about the discrimination and racial injustice against people of color on a daily basis.” This nagging feeling led her to experiment with developmentally appropriate strategies to increase racial awareness among young children, such as using picture books and analyzing her student’s narratives. A third example involved a candidate whose concern for equity led him to increase his advocacy for students in and outside the classroom. He reported that, on noticing some of his students were not being equitably served, he sought to experiment with strategies he gleaned from the literature with the aim of establishing and maintaining “safe and supportive relationships,” while increasing student engagement with content (inquiry report). After collecting data and analyzing the extent to which the interventions in the classroom were successful with the students, the candidate also reflected on his behavior change in terms of advocating for students outside of the classroom:

I also became more intentional about checking in with therapists and social workers about my students and advocating for students to get therapy when they didn't have it. It does appear that the combination of these relationships, therapy, our class structure changes, and cell phone policy have measurably improved the engagement of many of our students. (Inquiry report)

In the three examples discussed above, PST concerns for equity in relation to teaching and student learning informed their goal of improving practical knowledge of classroom matters. Of the eight PST social justice inquiries, only two showed a focus on interrogating institutional policies. The first example is from a candidate who reflected on the school's discipline policy. Acknowledging some of the advantages of the behavior management system used throughout her placement school, the candidate used the inquiry process to explore her growing discomfort with the system, which she concluded conflicted with her social justice ideals:

Over the course of this research, I realized that I have a strong interest in equity and justice. . . . This inquiry has also helped me realize that I was in conflict with myself for conforming to a system that I disagreed with because I chose to focus on all its great attributes instead. But as long as equity and justice remain at the core of my beliefs as a teacher, my approach to teaching will continue to be in conflict with [the school]. (Inquiry report)

This candidate used the inquiry process to critically examine a school policy, clarify her commitment to equity and justice, and ponder on the intersection of her personal and professional identities.

The second example is from a candidate who was a teacher of record while pursuing her MAT. She wrote at length in her inquiry report about teaching during COVID-19 as "navigating through what often felt like the 'dark' [with] glimpses of 'normal' on the horizon." She described her inquiry as her "metaphorical anchor, and with the help of my critical friend group, I was able to focus my attention on my own curiosities in search of understanding the situation better." She was especially concerned about equity issues related to COVID-19 practices in her classroom and in school policies. She framed one result of the inquiry process as follows:

A key takeaway from this inquiry process was the power of data as a tool for equity in education. I believe it would be a more effective argument to present to administrators the data to support the concern that international students are not receiving the same opportunities for teacher feedback or engagement that domestic students do based on the current schedule. (Inquiry report)

During course meetings, this candidate shared her plans to engage her school administration in a conversation about revising current school policies to ensure that students who could not attend school in person were not being disadvantaged.

The examples provided above illustrate that the eight candidates interested in social justice were eager and able to center equity in their inquiries. They saw advocating for equity in learning as a necessary part of their role as teachers; this became more urgent during the

pandemic. They were quick to name the social identities (e.g., race, disability, nationality) and their implications for student learning. They easily saw how classroom structures and school policies might contribute to inequity. They were concerned about inclusion, as well as heeding and amplifying student voices and preferences in the teaching and learning process. They sought to design interventions aimed at making their classrooms more inclusive, participatory, and democratic. They also readily interrogated the power dynamics present in teacher-student relationships and sought to minimize them. In highlighting social identities, equity practices, school policies, and power relations in their inquiries, these eight PSTs exhibited characteristics associated with the *advocating for social justice* passion. That their analyses in these areas could be deepened is without dispute. Furthermore, supporting more PSTs in the MAT program to see themselves as change agents for social justice through their practices is possible and desirable. Inquiry facilitation and program-wide recommendations toward this goal are discussed below.

### **Toward a Social Justice Emphasis in Preservice Teacher Inquiry**

The first recommendation involves providing more direct feedback around social justice to candidates during the inquiry process. In the past, as the facilitator, I refrained from pointing out social justice issues related to teacher inquiries, unless PSTs raised the issues first. It appears, however, that a more direct approach could be worthwhile. For example, facilitators can help candidates identify and frame research questions that highlight explorations of social identities and oppressive classroom and institutional policies. Also, facilitators can be deliberate about helping PSTs transfer their prior knowledge on how to conduct critical analyses of schooling to their inquiries. For some, as Storms (2015) notes, it may only require asking PSTs to “explain how the changes made as a result of conducting [teacher inquiry] are transformative for the students, parents, and communities” (p. 169). In cases where PSTs lack critical analysis knowledge, efforts should be made to include it in the courses preceding the inquiry project. Knowing when to be directive and being attentive to knowledge gaps are aspects of good facilitation. When PSTs show an interest in pursuing the social justice passion, facilitators should provide them with regular and detailed feedback to ensure that this focus is sustained throughout the teacher inquiry process.

Literature shows that collaborative PST inquiry is impactful (Ryan, 2021; Salerno & Kibler, 2015; Willegems et al., 2017). Peer collaboration could be useful, especially for PSTs pursuing the social justice passion. Facilitators can help sustain the focus on the social justice passion further by providing the support candidates need to work toward publishing their teacher inquiry papers in relevant journals or book chapters. This would help PSTs view themselves as valued contributors to knowledge about teaching. In this case, facilitation must be understood as extending mentorship beyond a one-time project that ends at the close of the semester. Hostetler et al. included PSTs as co-publishers in their 2013 study. They viewed this collaboration as supporting candidates’ transformational work beyond the semester’s end. Preparing manuscripts for publication may involve facilitators and PSTs working into the summer and providing candidates with the financial and other resources they may need. I am especially attracted to this strategy as a faculty member in a TEP that has been seeking to cultivate professional relations with alumni into their first jobs. Beginning teachers can also benefit from mentorship while accruing post-graduation credits toward their continuing professional education.

A related recommendation involves conducting research. There is evidence that teacher inquiry continues beyond preservice teacher education into novice and professional life (Baan et al., 2019; Baan & Volman, 2021). Special attention should be paid to social justice. The MAT program and similar TEPs that pursue (or seek to pursue) a social justice emphasis could follow up with their graduates to understand if and how, as new teachers, they operationalize teacher inquiry in their classrooms. In the case of this MAT program, a study of alumni is currently under consideration within broader institutional research efforts. Incorporating questions in post-graduate surveys about teacher inquiry involvement is possible and necessary. Such longitudinal research could yield valuable insights to aid in the program's transition toward a social justice emphasis.

The assumption here is that teacher educators and teacher education programs must engender the principles and dispositions associated with a teacher inquiry stance. This suggests embracing a culture anchored in systematic inquiry. Cochran-Smith (2003) argues that an inquiry stance “offers an intellectual as well as practical perspective on the education of teacher educators—a way of learning from and about the practice of teacher education by engaging in systematic inquiry on that practice within a community of colleagues” (p. 8). In the case of the MAT program, such an inquiry stance calls for subjecting the entire curriculum to inquiry within a learning community structure, where faculty, graduate students, and other stakeholders inquire recursively about various program aspects. In such an approach, everyone involved becomes “a learner, a researcher, a seeker of new insights, and a poser of questions for which no one in the group already has the answers” Cochran-Smith (2003). In this way, the entire curriculum can be reimagined. For example, the MAT capstone course, where teacher inquiry currently resides, would become one of many points in the teacher education curriculum where reflection around social justice is supported.

Using a common vocabulary and developing a shared understanding, especially of the term *social justice*, is a helpful initial step for teacher education social justice programs. Structures such as the “justice praxis” framework (Bondy et al., 2017) can be useful toward this end. Bondy and her colleagues have “identified seven contours of justice that illuminate what we believe justice looks like, feels like, and sounds like in teacher education, specifically, and community life, broadly” (p. 5). These contours describe justice as *democratic*, *radical hope*, *critical restorative*, *engaged*, *liberatory*, and *inquiry-oriented* (p. 6). Adopting frameworks such as justice praxis can provide the coherence and intellectual grounding that Cochran-Smith (2003) argues must undergird teacher education for social justice. Such frameworks, as Bondy et al. note, can “help to create the environment in which social justice praxis is possible” (p. 7). Such an environment would be characterized by “radical openness, humility, self-vigilance,” and “patient persistence” (p. 12).

Applying the notion of radical openness in TEPs like the MAT program could mean interrogating their composition along social identities (such as race, gender, class, or ability). Incorporating humility could include embracing conceptions of knowledge about learning to teach as tentative and incomplete. An example of self-vigilance would be sustaining genuine conversations among stakeholders (PSTs, supervisors, mentor teachers, and the wider community) about desired competencies for novice teachers. Patient persistence could involve finding ways to infuse social justice in multiple courses and field experiences throughout teacher



education. It could also mean extending the learning community beyond the campus and supporting novice teachers in their careers. If such an inquiry stance emphasizing social justice were adopted in this MAT program, it would add social consciousness to an already intellectually rigorous TEP. This is notwithstanding associated challenges and unintended consequences (Cochran-Smith, 2003). The MAT program's transition toward a social justice emphasis would likely influence PST teacher inquiry—both in its facilitation and teacher candidates' outcomes.

## Conclusion

As noted in the Introduction, the two related goals of this paper on PST inquiry were to deepen understanding of facilitation strategies and explore teacher candidates' inquiry stance as it relates to social justice. Facilitation strategies that could be useful in supporting PST inquiries include providing a clear and structured process, scheduling frequent meetings with facilitators and peers, and providing consistent written feedback. Additional strategies include teaching research skills prior to the teacher inquiry semester, creating a buddy system, and building more opportunities for collaboration. These recommendations may help ease the challenges reported by PSTs, which include overwhelm, time management issues, and lack of adequate research competence for teacher inquiry. The assumption here is that when teacher candidates are exposed to quality facilitation, they are also likely to engage beyond the practical concerns of teaching and learning and focus more on their roles as agents of change in their classrooms and beyond.

Storms (2015) expressed a concern that teacher education programs are not doing enough to nurture the development of PSTs' change agency that is aligned with social equity and social justice. More recently, Rutten (2021) reported limited movement toward this in the teacher inquiry studies he reviewed. Both researchers note that attention is required to support more teacher inquiries with a social justice focus. Data considered for the current study indicated that PSTs were beginning to view social justice inquiry as an important element of a teacher's role, despite the lack of a strong program articulation of this emphasis. More PSTs could apply the equity and social justice lens in their inquiries across passions. Additional facilitation strategies would be needed to support the social justice focus in PST inquiries. Also needed is to intentionally and systematically integrate social justice throughout the teacher education curriculum. This requires programs to be explicit about social justice as a desired learning outcome for their students. This paper recommends adoption of the inquiry stance with an emphasis on social justice in the planned revisioning of the MAT program—and in similar programs. It underlines the importance of frameworks, such as the justice praxis framework, in providing coherence and unity of vision in such work. A program shift toward social justice could influence the kinds of facilitation strategies used in teacher inquiry, as well as PST outcomes.

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