

*Research Article*

**Expect the Unexpected: (Re)Defining the Landscape of Equity Work During COVID:19**

**Christina Wright Fields**

Marist College  
  
**Mary Kelly**Aurora Public Schools

R

ecent developments in online learning have heightened the need for analyzing student learning and engagement in face to face versus a digital learning environment. Along with this growth in online education, there is also increasing concern over how both teachers design and students engage in generative and thought-provoking learning across digital platforms. For example, it is generally accepted that diversity courses--which are often required in higher education--are primarily designed to “foster critical dialogue, reflective thinking, collective learning, perspective consciousness, and transformative learning” (Ukpokdu, 2008, p. 227). So far, there has been little discussion about the impact of remote learning on students’ social justice development. Most studies in the field of diversity education have primarily focused on in-person classes. In this study, we endeavor to add to existing research around pedagogies for social justice in such a diversity course, analyzing the influence of digital learning and collective experience in shaping and re-shaping students’ understanding of equity.

In Spring 2020, during the global pandemic (COVID-19), we were challenged with the dilemma of fostering collective conversations about social justice outside of the face-to-face context due to the sudden online learning environment transition. During this unprecedented time, we asked ourselves how students could effectively learn discourses on social justice, let alone transform their perspectives in an online course. Not only were our students isolated from their communities, professors, and classrooms; they faced both collective and individual experiences around the pandemic. As instructors, we questioned whether we were ready to (re)define the landscape of equity work during COVID-19 and if students could engage in courageous conversations on equity and social justice, with hopes of transforming their perspectives in a new online course.

*We endeavor to add to existing research around pedagogies for social justice in such a diversity course, analyzing the influence of digital learning and collective experience in shaping and re-shaping students’ understanding of equity.*

This study examines data from one of our classes that transitioned to an online learning environment. The course explored diversity and social justice within the context of education. The students’ experience during an unparalleled transition provides some insights into how social justice learning might shift when transferred to a virtual environment. Through our descriptive analysis of student work, we blur the line between online, onsite, social justice, and mainstream to create novel interpretations of what it means to develop as a social justice-minded student and where it should and can take place. The major objective of this study was to investigate how students’ social justice language evolved when learning transitioned from an in-person to an online learning environment. This study seeks to address the following questions: 1) Did a change in the learning environment impact students’ social justice language? and if so, 2) Did this change also include students making connections between social justice or equity issues and the global pandemic? We hope that this study can provide practical insights into teaching culturally and linguistically diverse online communities of learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Justice

I

n an effort to contextualize our experiences, it is important to understand how we define social justice and situate it within the context of our online learning environment. In our conceptualization of social justice, we draw on asset-based pedagogies (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valdés, 1996; Gay, 2010; Tatum, 2000; Paris & Alim, 2017). Specifically, we use the language and framework surrounding culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; 2017) which grew out of Ladson-Billings’ (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, pushing teachers to not only create spaces in classrooms that honored diverse perspectives and experiences, but “*to sustain*--linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 88). Paris and Alim (2017) describe three central ideas that differentiate culturally sustaining pedagogy from its predecessor culturally relevant pedagogy. The first idea calls for a decentering of whiteness and asks for an acknowledgment that systems of white supremacy exist. A second component of culturally sustaining pedagogy is to instruct in a way that “sustain(s) the cultural ways of being communities of color” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 5). The third component of culturally sustaining pedagogy calls for teachers and students to turn the critical gaze inward and to closely examine cultural practices in communities of color (Paris & Alim, 2017). Utilizing culturally sustaining pedagogy as a framework, we attempted to engage students in thinking critically about their own culture. Through various reflective assignments, we guided students in analyzing the ways in which they consciously or unconsciously reproduced oppressive ideologies.

Social Justice Online

Puzio et al. (2017) argue that “although there is widespread support for culturally sustaining instruction, there is a lack of understanding about the challenges that teachers face while trying to do this” (p. 224). In their article, they attribute teachers’ *creative failure*s with CSP to the cultural disconnect between teachers and students, myths and misconceptions about culturally sustaining pedagogy, and a failure to include community member’s knowledge and insight into their curriculum. Through analyzing teachers’ experiences, Puzio et al. (2017) conclude that teaching in culturally sustaining ways “takes time, reflection, and above all, being deeply attuned to students [and communities]” (p. 231). By drawing on CSP, as a theoretical framework to both design the course, and to monitor student social justice development, we are in conversation with the complexities around both enacting and learning about culturally sustaining pedagogy. Designing and implementing meaningful culturally sustaining learning for students in a face-to-face environment has its hurdles, and while designing such experiences in a digital classroom does not necessarily require a conceptual shift in instructional approaches, the technology used to engage with CSP within the digital classroom does impact both teaching and learning (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010). In both the face-to-face and digital environment, we recognize the potential for replicating the creative failures faced by CSP implementation. However, recent design in online learning has encouraged the use of technologies to allow for dialogue to closely mirror face to face interactions, and the digital environment holds a unique possibility to add a unique approach to a reflection that may support students in developing their understanding around equity and social justice. Although these discussion forums are not a perfect substitute for spoken language (Delahunty, 2018), and students may be reluctant to participate in these mediums, specifically when they are already facing obstacles outside of school (Bailie, 2017; Delahunty, 2018; Lander, 2014), we are compelled to see the potential of these technologies in a social justice course.

METHODS

Context: Diversity in Education Course

T

he course discussed in this study focused on social and cultural diversity composition and issues within today’s public schools. Attention was given to the trends in schools related to population, race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic components, ability, organization, and family structure, which are central to most other social justice and diversity issues. One main objective of the course is for students to develop greater familiarity with diversity, multiculturalism, equity, and social justice. Culturally sustaining pedagogy was used and discussed to support students in reflecting and understanding how social realities and problems that exist in K-12 education are related to issues of difference.

The diversity course was designed to be a culturally safe place where students could engage in difficult dialogues to reflect, analyze, interrogate, and respond to issues of social justice in education and society while simultaneously grappling with their self-reflections and self-realization regarding their and others’ identities. Topics related to social justice (i.e., race and ethnicity, social identities, multiculturalism, social justice, privilege, culture, and culturally sustaining pedagogies) were discussed throughout the course. Throughout the course students engaged in purposeful discussions and activities that encouraged them to critically analyze the impact of culture, context, and identity. We choose this single course to be analyzed because the course had previously been taught only in-person and we were interested in exploring if students (re)defined the landscape of equity or social justice learning when faced with finishing their coursework online due to COVID-19. The course initially began in-person for the first eight weeks and eventually transitioned online to an asynchronous format for the final seven weeks.

Participants

This study used a convenience sample of twenty-two students enrolled in a diversity in education course at a small private Northeastern four-year institution. Students expressed or shared their identities during the semester via course assignments and in-class activities, Table 1 illustrates the compiled demographics of students enrolled in the diversity in education course. The majority of the students enrolled in the course identified as White and female. For the purpose of analysis, we chose examples that were representative of the larger data.

Table 1  
*Students Enrolled in the Diversity in Education Course*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Characteristics | n |
| Gender  Female  Male | 14  8 |
| Race and ethnic origin  White (non-Hispanic)  Black (non-Hispanic)  Asian (non-Hispanic)  Other non-Hispanic\*  Hispanic | 11  2  0  4  5 |
| *Note. \*Includes: American Indians, Pacific Islanders, Alaska natives, and “more than one race”.* | |

As researchers, our identities shape our perspectives and understandings of social justice and equity within our respective academic spaces. The role of the researcher as an instrument of data collection requires the researcher to disclose his or her personal experiences, values, assumptions, beliefs, and biases that can impact how the data is interpreted (Yin, 2003). Researcher 1 identifies as a Black female and Researcher 2 as a White female. Our identities impact how we view and understand social justice. We have a passion for social justice and equity work and felt a responsibility to purposefully integrate these concepts into their courses. Wright Fields was the sole instructor for the diversity in education course utilized in this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our analysis began with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to examine course assignments to understand: 1) if a change in learning environment impacted students’ social justice language and 2) if students connected the current global pandemic to social justice issues. Data for this study were collected using two assignments (discussion board post and a Flip Grid video) from a diversity in education course. Both assignments were discussions, one was a traditional discussion board format whereas Flip Grid allows educators to create “grids” to facilitate video discussions. The grids resemble message boards where teachers can post questions or share prompts for students to post video responses that appear in a tiled grid display. Students are also able to respond to classmates' grids. While students also had other reflective assignments during the course (e.g., critical autoethnography, I am poem, and voice journals) that were also powerful, due to space constraints, we selected their first discussion board post and final Flip Grid since it specifically provided insight into a discussion assignment that was altered for a digital environment.

The first assignment was students’ responses to an online discussion board. Students completed weekly posts and responses based on an assigned prompt (see Appendix A). The discussion board allowed students to reflect further on key concepts and activities that occurred during in-class meetings. When the course transitioned online students continued to complete weekly discussion boards and reviewed resources (i.e., media, articles, book chapters, recorded presentations) asynchronous. Their second assignment was a Flip Grid video (see Appendix B) that connected to their initial discussion prompt. The Flip Grid video was an assignment completed at the end of the semester. These assignments served as conduits because they allowed students to begin to explore how their cultural background or identity played a part in their educational experience and society as a whole. Issues of culture, religion, ethnicity, race, and class contribute to the multiple experiences that individuals encounter while engaging in school.

In our analysis, we specifically looked for instances of students talking about issues of social justice and identity in their reflective assignments. Across the two assignments, we looked for patterns in how student language around social justice was correlated to culturally responsive pedagogy. We analyzed whether students’ language illustrated a move towards the development of “a critical consciousness through which [students] challenge[d] the status quo of the current social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). We extended this analysis to the three loving critiques of culturally sustaining pedagogy--decentering of whiteness, sustaining the cultural ways of being communities of color, and turning the critical gaze inward to closely examine cultural practices in communities of color (Paris & Alim, 2017). In particular, we looked for language associated with culture, identity, race, ethnicity, and diversity to begin our categorical approach to understanding how students were taking up asset-based pedagogies and considered examples of capital (i.e., cultural and social), privilege, and oppression to extend that analysis specifically to culturally sustaining pedagogy. We first each independently coded the data to ensure consistency across our coding practices. After this initial calibration, we returned to this data through multiple cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2009) to identify meaningful “chunks” or examples of student language around social justice (Bazeley, 2007).

FINDINGS

T

he results of this study indicate students’ engagement with the social justice language, specifically around the loving critiques of culturally sustaining pedagogy changed only slightly across the onsite and online learning environment. The first question in this study sought to understand whether a change in the learning environment impacted a students’ social justice language. Students began to decenter Whiteness by taking initial steps to learn more about the cultural practices of individuals of color, some students discussed how they would intentionally integrate cultural knowledge and experiences in their future professions. Even though there was not a change in the way students engaged in social justice language, they continued to become more comfortable and knowledgeable about diversity, equity, and privilege.

*Teaching social justice online is even more difficult because we are siloed, divorced from physically communicating and connecting.*

The second question sought to determine if students made connections between social justice or equity issues and the global pandemic. Our findings centered on bringing the outside in through reflection of one’s context and identity. As students became more aware of themselves and others, some students brought in the pandemic through codes of reflection on context and identity. In the findings below (see Table 2), three major themes recurred throughout the dataset: 1) Reflection on social justice, 2) Reflection on identity, and 3) Reflection on context. As students’ reflected and considered their contexts and identities their understandings of social justice generally shifted. An overall change in students’ use of conversations within the course and around the global pandemic began to evolve to reflect issues of social justice, access, and equity.

Table 2

*Thematic analysis of coded instances across assignments*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Discussion Board | Flip Grid |
| Reflection on social justice | 5 | 6 |
| Reflection on identity | 7 | 6 |
| Reflection on context | 8 | 5 |
| Other | 3 | 3 |
| Totals | 23 | 20 |

Reflection on Social Justice Language

The first theme, reflection on social justice language, refers to how students approached and engaged in social justice language. Students utilized social justice language in conversations regarding diversity, equity, privilege, and allyship. They used the language to have open and honest conversations and ultimately developed a shared language of understanding with their peers and instructor.

Another student, Candace, acknowledged in her initial discussion post the lack of exposure to different cultures. She speaks about others becoming more culturally aware but never mentions her cultural awareness or even describes her own identity. Also, she does not mention any social justice issues, rather she encourages cultural acceptance.

Discussion board – Candace:

*One of the biggest problems in diversity in public education is the lack of exposure to different cultures. Whether it be race, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc., people are always going to be standoffish or even prejudiced to those other than them. The more they learn and the more they're exposed, the more they will have an understanding and not only tolerance but acceptance towards those with a different culture and viewpoint.*

Flip Grid – Candace:

*I hope you guys are all doing safe and well. I think individuals can address issues of culture, power, and privilege by recognizing their privilege and using their privilege as a voice to help others who don’t have the same privilege as we do. I will apply what I learned in this class in my own classroom as a future teacher about diversity. And like what if it's my students of different races, genders, sexual orientations if they share that with me and how I can be an ally and support them in their educational journey.*

Candace’s Flip Grid begins by inquiring if her peers are safe and well [during the pandemic], but unfortunately does not make any connections between the pandemic and social justice. Candace discussed privilege broadly but never shares how access or lack of privilege impacts her life. She emphasizes what others can do with their privilege to become advocates for others. Also, she acknowledges and realizes as a future educator she will have diverse identities in her classroom, and she envisions herself becoming an ally to support them in their educational journey. Again, not once reflecting on her own culture or personal experiences with diversity or social justice.

Initially, Heather associates inequality as a major challenge to diversity, she encourages equality and inclusive spaces for individuals with differences. She correlates diversity to positivity despite acknowledging her perception of the United States’ continuous focus on inequality. She shares a field placement experience to describe social justice and diversity challenges that exist in K-12 educational spaces.

Discussion board – Heather:

*I believe the challenges related to diversity in public education are that people in the United States are more focused on getting rid of inequality instead of finding ways to promote equality and allow individuals to portray their differences. When I hear “diversity” and other words related to it, I think of cultural backgrounds and self- identification that individuals have for themselves. I think this because I believe diversity is a positive aspect of the world. As a future educator, diversity is something I am not afraid to have in my classroom. Even from my experience in fieldwork at local elementary school, I saw that in just one classroom, there were English Language Learners, students from various places around the world, and students with identified as well as unidentified disabilities. I know that it will be difficult to meet the needs of every child, as I witnessed during the daily struggle of the teacher at the school, but I am willing to accept the challenge. I want students to feel safe in my classroom and share their differences because so much can be learned from one another’s backgrounds and experiences.*

Flip Grid – Heather:

*Key insights from this class I have included the power of conversations and that our culture is very important to who we are. I learned that conversations about personal identity are very difficult, especially in a society where we are afraid to be seen as racist or biased. I learned that conversations shouldn’t be avoided due to the fear of offense because sometimes a lack of conversation can actually lead to more problems and social groups might end up distancing themselves from one another. I also learned that our culture does not explain all aspects of who we are but it can explain parts of our background that are integral to our identity.*

Heather realized that social justice includes having difficult dialogues that allow individuals to explore and understand not only their own but others’ cultures and identities. Conversations about identities are challenging because of one’s or another’s group memberships but growth occurs when individuals step out of their comfort zones. Difficult dialogues can encourage students to participate in open discussion and debate while challenging individuals to consider diverse perspectives.

Reflection on Identity

The second theme, reflection on identity, describes how students consider their understanding of self and how it may impact the ways others perceived or treated them. Identity includes backgrounds, lived experiences, values, memories, and relationships. Whereas, identity formation encompasses

a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process of taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them. (Tatum, 2018, p. 7)

Some students reflected on their personal and social identities, and they began to realize that some identities may have afforded them access to various privileges or resources. Initially, Brian believed that everyone had a fair share of being successful, especially if they had similar upbringings and shared similar viewpoints. He honestly mentions that he engaged with many people from different identities and none of their identities impacted his relationship with them.

*Some students reflected on their personal and social identities, and they began to realize that some identities may have afforded them access to various privileges or resources.*

Discussion board – Brian:

*In public education, a lack of diversity can be a huge problem in the contribution to classroom discussion. If everyone has similar upbringings, students will tend to have the same views on certain things, and they have trouble being open-minded. Diversity allows different people of different backgrounds to come together and learn as a whole. Classroom discussions will drastically shift and people can be more accepting and understanding to people who had different upbringings. In education, it is good to have people around you who are different because you can learn more about people and you can enhance your communication skills. The world outside of the classroom is going to be diverse especially in any work environment, so it is best that a child grows up in that kind of environment. In my case, my high school was very diverse and it had a very positive impact on my learning. I met people of many different races and religions and I can say that those differences had no effect on my relationship with them.*

Brian began to realize his identity and understanding of self impacted his interactions with others and in society as a whole. Identify formation is a lifelong process that involves “discovery of the new; recovery of the old, forgotten, or appropriated; and synthesis of the new and old” (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2018, p. 11). He began to understand how his privilege informed his lived experiences and understanding of diversity and social justice.

Flip Grid – Brian:

*Being in high school, I always had an appreciation for diversity, I learned to collaborate with people of different cultures. My perception of social justice has definitely changed from my high school self to now. In fact, that when I was a high school student, I always preached that if we went to the same high school, we had the same opportunity to succeed. We are given the same resources. I started to slowly see that maybe I have a lot more privilege than what I normally expected in high school. I really changed my beliefs in that sense. I was always granted outside tutors, my parents provided one on one tutoring for the SATs, my regular classes. They sent me to clinics to train for sports, wrestling, and all that. I’ve come to realize that those outside resources were crucial in my performance in school and some people can’t afford to send their kids to do that which lowers your chances of going to your dream school, maybe. So, those outside resources are because my family was able to afford it and not everyone can afford that. So, if we go to the same high school it doesn’t necessarily mean that we got the same opportunities and we don’t.*

Brian understood how his identity influenced his development, he began to gain insights on how cultural practices and resources shaped his identity formation. He also realized that others who did not share his same identity markers may not have been afforded the same access to these privileges or resources. He realized that his high school experiences differed from his peers and that not everyone had similar or equitable experiences. Identity and context both shape one’s individual experiences.

Reflection on Context

The last theme, reflection on context, describes the impact of students’ context on their understanding of self and others. Often students reflected on their K-12 educational experiences, in particular their teacher’s identities and their access to resources and/or privileges. Helen associated race and gender with educator diversity, the majority of her teachers were White women. Eventually, she shares that as a future teacher she intends to integrate students' context into her curriculum. However, it's important to note she makes no mention of her context, identity, or background.

Discussion board – Helen:

*I feel as if educators lack diversity, which ultimately affects what kind of educational experience students have. Many schools and educational institutions focus so much on hiring teachers that fit their "perfect mold" of an educator. For example, many people still think of women more often when hearing the word "teacher." Aside from gender, I think that teachers lack diversity in terms of their race, ethnicities, and life experiences. I think that schools should make picking a diverse educational staff a priority because it will ultimately impact and better the culture of the school itself. If teachers of a school all originate from the same background, there will not be a variation in the types of classes and lessons that the students experience. In elementary school, I did not have a wide variety of teachers in terms of race and gender and I believe that this particular experience limited me.*

*I want to focus on creating projects and assessments that allow students to display their backgrounds and show their pride for where they have come from! Students always enjoy more personalized assignments because they can talk about themselves and their own experiences.*

Flip Grid – Helen:

*I hope you are all doing well. My understanding has evolved from promoting equality in my classroom to promoting equity in the classroom as a paramount and must be implemented. Social justice to me is no longer about treating all students the same but is actually about giving students the same opportunities to succeed. To me, this means I will provide my students with any additional materials, instruction, and resources to help them succeed. A classroom that promotes social justice is a classroom that practices that each student as an individual with specific needs that must be meant. My perspective and understanding of diversity has also evolved, whenever I thought about diversity in the past, I immediately connected the word race and ethnicity to diversity*. *This course has emphasized and taught me that diversity also pertains to sexuality, religion, socioeconomic class, ability, and many more areas.*

*One key concept that I will remember is the idea of privilege and its many different interpretations. I learned that most people do have privilege whether it's in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ability, or socioeconomic class. I also learned that privilege isn’t always about being rich or having a financial advantage over others which was my initial interpretation. With the current situation, I am privileged to be able to learn online after the campus is closed.*

Similar to Candace, Helen inquired about her peer’s well-being during the pandemic. Helen’s Flip Grid illustrates her understanding and application of these fundamental terms. Initially, she continues to share her desire to not only be a multicultural educator but to be a socially just educator, one that is aware of all students’ needs. She also acknowledges how her understanding of diversity evolved from race and ethnicity to encompass other aspects of identity. She concludes her Flip Grid by recognizing how her specific context afforded her privileges during the global pandemic. Helen was cognizant of the privilege she had during this pandemic, she recognized the access and resources available to her to finish her spring coursework. She foresaw being able to leverage her knowledge and access to technology to further her professional network and advance her social capital. Did Helen mention the pandemic because she was directly affected or did the pandemic allow her to become more aware of her privileges?

LIMITATIONS

T

he findings in this study are subject to at least three limitations. First, the reader should bear in mind that this study is based on a small sample size of students enrolled in a diversity education course at a Northeastern private liberal arts college. Second, most of the students identified as White and affluent. Thirdly, the study did not evaluate a course that began completely online, rather the study explored if an online learning environment impacted students’ social justice language. The scope of this study was limited in terms of only collecting data from one semester due to unprecedented times that shifted an in-person class quickly to a remote learning course.

DISCUSSION

I

n this study, we analyzed the influence of digital learning and collective experience in (re)defining students’ understanding of equity. The research findings presented in the aforementioned section described students’ engagement with social justice language and their reflection on identity and context. Some students pushed past their comfort zones to enhance their engagement with social justice language, while others chose to encourage their peers to be advocates, while they themselves were self-selecting not to (re)define their social justice awareness. However, our findings suggest that when students actively engage in social justice language they are moving forward and exploring new territory. They are participating in self-reflection of themselves and others, by exploring and reflecting on their identities and contexts.

*Social justice work is laborious and rarely do people want to engage in courageous conversations that challenge their understandings of self and others.*

Teaching social justice is hard. Teaching social justice online is even more difficult because we are siloed, divorced from physically communicating and connecting. Teaching to the whole person, the context, and not just the content provides students with an opportunity to understand the other and engage in meaningful dialogues with peers and instructors. Social justice work is laborious and rarely do people want to engage in courageous conversations that challenge their understandings of self and others. Race, socioeconomic class, and other aspects of identity are ongoing topics of discussion and often mentioned in numerous courses.

We think online pedagogy makes it difficult to engage in social justice, but in reality, the online pedagogy coupled with the current global pandemic allowed their engagement in social justice to become more real. Faculty can create spaces for students to explore social justice and make meaningful connections to recent events. Furthermore, faculty have the responsibility to proactively encourage dialogue both within and outside of the classrooms (i.e., online environments) that create space for individuals to engage in critical self-reflection and identity exploration. As instructors, we felt responsible for encouraging students’ engagement in social justice because of our passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because of COVID-19, we wanted to explore the intersection of getting to know our students through a collective experience, of navigating the pandemic and engaging in social justice language. The students became more vulnerable and willing to share their experiences and perspectives surrounding the global pandemic and especially the impact it had on higher education and K-12 education.

*Faculty have the responsibility to proactively encourage dialogue both within and outside of the classrooms (i.e., online environments) that create space for individuals to engage in critical self-reflection and identity exploration.*

FUTURE RESEARCH

T

his study provided an important opportunity to advance the understanding of how students’ social justice language evolved in an online learning environment in the midst of COVID-19. This is a very unique data moment that might be repeated again this year. One of the questions that emerged from these findings is the narrative discussion regarding which format is best to transform students’ social justice language: Onsite or online? Regardless of the format, classes that expand students’ social justice language are very much needed. Further research should be conducted as a comparative study of the same diversity course instructed in different formats, onsite and online. This comparative study could explore how course format impacts the transformation of students’ social justice language.

CONCLUSION

I

n the context of our diversity course, we learned that students’ educational experiences are shaped by societal interactions (e.g., schooling) as well as their interpretation and responses to these experiences (Ogbu, 2004). Diversity courses are imperative in higher education because they promote inclusive learning spaces while fostering culturally aware and competent students. Faculty have the opportunity to transform classrooms that discuss and appreciate cultural differences. The main goal of the current study was to understand if a change in the learning environment impacted a students’ social justice language and if this change included students making connections between social justice or equity issues and the global pandemic. Our study provided practical insights into teaching culturally and linguistically diverse online communities of learners. We realized the benefits and challenges of having students engage in social justice conversations. Some students continued to have self-reflections regarding their and other identities while others primarily encouraged other individuals to become social change agents.

Our findings suggest a need to continue to engage students in social justice dialogue regardless of the learning environment format. Furthermore, our findings highlight the importance of building and fostering relationships with the instructor and students that encourage everyone to engage in courageous conversations about social justice. If social justice educators are purposeful with creating culturally safe spaces during the crucial beginning weeks of their course, then they can leverage and build on this foundation to continue difficult dialogues around issues of equity and inclusion. Educators can then foster students’ social justice awareness as well as how to engage in ongoing reflection and valuation of equity, social justice, and diversity in education, and hopefully society.

REFERENCES

Bailie, J. (2017). Can you hear me now? An examination of online learner communication preference*. Journal of Instructional Pedagogies, 18*, 1-8.

Bazeley, P. (2007). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo*. Sage.

Birks, M., Hoare, K. & Mills, J. (2019). Grounded theory: The FAQs. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 18*(7), 1-7. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919882535

Charmaz, K. (2005). Grounded Theory in the 21st century: Applications for advancing social justice studies (pp. 507-537). In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.)*.* SAGE Publications.

Delahunty, J., Verenikina, I., & Jones, P. (2014). Socio-emotional connections: Identity, belonging and learning in online interactions. A literature review. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, *23*(2), 243-265.

Delahunty, J. (2018). Connecting to learn, learning to connect: Thinking together in asynchronous forum discussion. *Linguistics and Education*, *46*, 12-22.

Gay, G. (2003). *Becoming multicultural educators: Personal journey toward professional journey.* Jossey-Bass.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching* (2nd ed.)(Multicultural Education). NY. Teachers College.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies or qualitative research.* Aldine Transaction.

Guthrie, K. L., & McCracken, H. (2010). Teaching and learning social justice through online service-learning courses. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *11*(3), 78-94.

Kirk, G., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2018). Identities and social locations: Who am I? Who are my people? In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, D.C. Catalano, K. Dejong, H. Hackman, L. Hopkins, B. Love, M. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (pp. 10-15). Routledge.

Lander, J. (2014). Conversations or virtual IREs? Unpacking asynchronous online discussions using exchange structure analysis. *Linguistics and Education*, *28*, 41-53.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Resource Journal, 32*(3), 465-491.

Luttrell, W. (2010). Introduction: The promise of qualitative research in education. In W. Luttrell (Ed.), *Qualitative educational research: Readings in reflexive methodology and transformational practice* (pp. 1-10). Routledge.

Moll, L.C., & Gonzalez, N. (1994). Critical issues: Lessons from research with language-minority children. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 26,* 439-456

Nieto, S. (2000). Placing equity front and center: Some thoughts on transforming teacher education for a new century. *Journal of Teacher Education, 51*(3), 180-187.

Ogbu, J. U. (2004). Collective identity and the burden of “acting White” in Black history, community, and education. *The Urban Review*, *36*(1), 1-35.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy; A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(1), 85-100.

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.

Puzio, K., Newcomer, S., Pratt, K., McNeely, K., Hooker, S., & Jacobs, M. (2017). Creative failures in culturally sustaining pedagogy. *Language Arts, 94*(4), 223-233.

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* Sage Publications Ltd.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Tatum, B. D. (2000). The complexity of identity: Who am I? In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H. W. Hackman, M. L. Peters, & X. Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (pp. 9–15). Routledge.

Tatum, B. D. (2018). The complexity of identity: Who am I? In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, D.C. Catalano, K. Dejong, H. Hackman, L. Hopkins, B. Love, M. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zuniga. (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (pp. 7-9). Routledge.

Ukpokodu, O.N. (2008). Teachers’ reflections on pedagogies that enhance learning in an online course on teaching for equity and social justice. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 7*(3), 227-255.

Uzuner, S. (2009). Questions of culture in distance learning: A research review. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *10*(3). https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v10i3.690

Valdés, G. (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools*. Teachers College Press.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.

A person smiling for the camera

Description automatically generated with low confidence**Christina Wright Fields, Ph.D.**, *Marist College*, is a higher education scholar whose research agenda focuses on minoritized teachers and students’ experiences both in K-12 and postsecondary education contexts. She also examines the cultural interactions between pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, K-12 students, and school administrators.

A picture containing person, clothing, smiling, posing

Description automatically generated**Mary Kelly, Ph.D.,** *Aurora Public Schools,* works closely with pre-service and in-service teachers, specifically considering the environments or experiences that invite secondary teacher candidates to consider being socially just. Her research, grounded in critical and post-structural theories, centers on preparing teachers to conceive of practice through anti-oppressive pedagogy.

To cite this article:

Wright Fields, C., & Kelly, M. (2021). Expect the unexpected: (Re)defining the landscape of equity work during COVID:19. *Dialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal, 6*(2), Article A1146.

|  |
| --- |
| **Appendix A**  **Discussion Board Post** |
| **Instructions** |
| Discussion with your classmates is a vital part of learning. Each week students will submit 1 post and 2 responses, unless instructed differently.  Post requirements   * Your post should exhibit careful thought and logical reasoning and provide evidence for your position. * Use correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar. * The discussion post must be between 175—300 words.   Replying to other students' posts   * You are required to read and reply to other students. Your replies should offer new substantiated ideas or thoughtful questions. Try not to dominate the conversation. * Keep in mind that your goal in responding is rooted in keeping the conversation going. Be respectful and non-confrontational. Seek for understanding and encourage peers to engage in critical reflection. Share resources. * The response should be between 50—100 words.   Important Notes   * Students are expected to incorporate and cite external resources in both their post and responses. Please cite the external resource at the end of your posts and responses. The citation is not included in your word count. |
| **Prompt** |
| Your initial post should articulate what you view as a problem, challenge, or issue related to diversity in public education? When you hear “diversity,” multiculturalism,” or “social justice,” what comes to mind? And why? What do these mean to you and your role as a future educator? |

|  |
| --- |
| **Appendix B**  **Flip Grid** |
| **Instructions** |
| Students will submit 2 videos on Flip Grid. For the first video students will respond to any of the 3 questions listed below. This video needs to be at least 2 minutes (3 minutes max). In the second video students will provide solid peer feedback by replying to at least one of their peer’s videos. |
| **Prompt** |
| * How has your understanding of diversity or social justice in education evolved? Where are you now versus where you started? * What are you committed to doing to further your knowledge, dispositions and skills related to multiculturalism/social justice/diversity? * In what ways will you challenge yourself in regards to social justice/diversity/multiculturalism? |