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Student teachers' perceptions and experiences of certain modules within a transformed curriculum to foster social justice

Emma Groenewald  and Anthony Mpisi 

Department of Education, School of Education, Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South Africa
tony.mpisi@spu.ac.za

Since 1994, numerous policies promoted social justice and the transformation of the South African society. The re-curriculated Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme at the Sol Plaatje University aims to equip students with knowledge and skills to realise the aim of social justice. The aim of this study was to explore Sol Plaatje University students' experiences and perceptions of a curriculum that aims to promote social justice. We selected 3 education modules, with the assumption that they reflected social justice content. Four students, representative of different ethnic and language groupings at the university were chosen as participants. Data were generated through 3 reflective exercises about each of the modules, spread over a period of 3 years. The module aims, linked with the narratives of the participants' perceptions and experiences of each module, provided an overview of their experiences of the enacted curriculum. A qualitative research design with an interpretivist approach informed by Dover's (2013) social justice pedagogy was used. The students' narratives shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of how the BEd curriculum worked towards social justice and revealed the students' perceptions of otherness. From the narratives it became apparent that the 3 modules did promote a social justice orientation in prospective teachers educated at the university.

Keywords: inclusion; social justice; student diversity; student teachers; teacher education; transformed curriculum

Introduction

Prior to 1994, South African higher education institutions were unequal and fragmented. The system of apartheid created racially segregated higher education institutions where White students received quality support and education, while Black, Coloured and Indian students were disadvantaged (Bitzer, 2009). After 1994, the new democratic dispensation prioritised the transformation of higher education. Numerous policies were developed to address the past imbalances, and it was clear that transformation in higher education could play a critical role in educating socially responsible and independent citizens with the appropriate prerequisite transformational skills (Webbstock & Fisher, 2016). Embedded in transformation is social justice, a key principle in policies since 1994. Social justice education is intended to prepare student teachers to teach in diverse school settings. Furthermore, social justice education pays attention to social injustices in institutions and the historical and cultural embeddedness of individuals (Grant & Agosto, 2008). The social justice agenda should thus be an integral part of initial teacher education. Robbins, Francis and Elliot (2003:94) agree with this sentiment and argue that initial teacher education programmes play a key role in providing teachers with the necessary competence "to promote equal opportunities, social justice and sustainable development from the local to the global scale in schools."

Numerous scholars have done research on social justice education. Dover (2013:10) believes that teaching for social justice "requires teachers to simultaneously meet social justice goals, local curricular mandates, and accountability demands." Meyers (2009) argues that social justice education is about raising students' consciousness of oppression and working towards equality. Likewise, L. Gonzalez (2009) points out that social justice education assists student teachers to investigate their assumptions as well as their professional and personal identities. Yet, Nieto (2000) warns that equal academic opportunities for learners can only be achieved when the social justice agenda is part of the teacher education programme.

Conversely, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) believe that social justice education recognise inequality profoundly entrenched in the existing structure of society. Young (2000) expands on this idea and insists that an understanding of the dominant and subdominant structures in society and among individuals is the foundation of social justice education. According to McDonald (2007, 2008), social justice education recognises that the needs of each individual are unique and self-determining, while the dominant and subdominant social groups determine the distribution of power and resources. Social justice education thus identifies the paradoxical nature of our identity. Similarly, in South Africa, social justice education has also been widely researched. In keeping with the South African context, Nkoane (2012:7) asserts that social justice in education should "address the social inequalities present in an unjust society or education institutions." Francis and Le Roux (2012:16) view social justice education as "a process and a goal that allows for the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs." Moje (2007:3-4), on the other hand, differentiates between socially just pedagogy ("all youth have equitable opportunities to learn") and social justice pedagogy ("transformative opportunities for all youth").

Notably, thus far, research on social justice education has failed to deal with teacher education programmes (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). Most studies in social justice education, though, have focused on only one principle – either democratic education, culturally responsive teaching, multicultural teaching or

critical pedagogy. In this article we explore how student teachers at the Sol Plaatje University (SPU) perceive and experience certain modules that have been designed to promote social justice. The narratives of the student teachers describe how three modules, spread over a period of 3 years, have aided them to reflect on their perceptions and experiences of social justice. The findings may make an important contribution to the field of social justice education in higher education and the training of student teachers as agents of social justice.

A qualitative methodology assisted us to answer the research question, namely: To what extent do certain modules within the BED programme of the SPU promote student teachers' perceptions and experiences of social justice? As educators of student teachers at a newly established South African university, we believe that curricula should be aligned with the vision for social transformation.

Literature Review

Scholars have divergent and often conflicting views on the concept "curriculum." Mulenga (2018:20) describes it as "all the selected, organized, integrative, innovative and evaluative educational experiences provided to learners consciously or unconsciously under the school authority in order to achieve the designated learning outcomes which are achieved as a result of growth, maturation and learning meant to be best utilized for life in a changing society." Barnett and Coate (2005), on the other hand, take a more critical stance, arguing that curriculum is not ideologically free, as it is a social construct rather than a concept that is inextricably linked to human interaction.

While scholars may differ with regard to defining curriculum, there seems to be consensus that curriculum indeed possesses elements of human collaboration, development, learning and fluidity in an ever-changing world. These elements are equally present in the higher education space, where a curriculum is fluid and subsequently adapted and altered continuously, as is dictated by the circumstantial context.

Along the same line, a transformed curriculum has become fundamental to discourse on education worldwide and seems to be interrelated with social justice education (Cho, 2017). The foundational aims of a transformed curriculum are, essentially, to eliminate inequalities regarding race, class, socio-economic background, and gender in education (Zeichner, 2011). Social justice through transformation "aims at considering how pedagogy can be used as an act of change that fundamentally reshapes how students and teachers engage and interact with society" (Osman, Ojo & Hornsby, 2018:395). Accordingly, a transformed curriculum focuses on equality and equity for all,

regardless of social category. Furthermore, a transformed curriculum encapsulates two critical traits, namely, functional literacy and critical literacy (Cho, 2017). Functional literacy, which includes higher-order skills, relates to the ability to live aptly as an autonomous and informed member of society (Gutstein, 2006). Critical literacy, on the other hand, refers to "the ability to challenge existing paradigms of knowledge, question institutionalized power relations, and build strategies to act for equity and social justice" (Cho, 2017:7). These literacies play an imperative part not only in transforming a curriculum but also as far as social justice education is concerned, since both literacies enable students to become critically aware of oppressive practices in society.

Teacher education in South Africa

Curriculum transformation features prominently on the agenda of South African higher education institutions, as is obvious from the rich legislative and policy framework. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, (hereafter referred to as the Constitution) states its intention as follows: "[to h]eal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights" (RSA, 1996:preamble). The values stemming from the Constitution place a specific responsibility on higher education institutions, in particular, to revere, defend and uphold the rights of all South Africans, thus ensuring social justice. Proclamations of the Constitution are pronounced further in *White Paper 3 – A programme for the transformation of higher education*, which aims "to contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens" (DoE, RSA, 1997:s. 1.3). Scholars such as November (2010) and Sayed (2004) support this view and assert that pre-service teachers should be equipped to comprehend and operate in diverse classrooms that function according to democratic values.

Drawing from the above policy frameworks, the National Qualifications Framework Act (67/2008) – Revised Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) identifies seven roles of the newly qualified teacher. One of these roles relates to the "community, citizenship and pastoral role", which requires teachers to "uphold the Constitution and promote democratic values and practices in schools and society" and to "practise and promote a critical, committed and ethical attitude towards developing a sense of respect and responsibility towards others" (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2013:59). In addition, the MRTEQ (DHET, RSA, 2015:s. 7) necessitates that "newly qualified teachers must understand diversity in the South

African context in order to teach in a manner that includes all learners.”

Importantly, incorporating aspects encouraging genuine democratic values and practices is a critical requirement of a transformed curriculum, but is often overlooked in teacher education programmes (Ukpokodu, 2007:12). While most initial teacher education programmes do contain modules in diversity, these are often not linked to social justice issues – “they fail to ask the difficulty [*sic*] questions related to access, equity, and social justice” (Ukpokodu, 2007:12). In an attempt to resolve concerns with regard to access, equity and social justice, among other things, the MRTEQ (DHET, RSA, 2015:s. 2.4) requires that all teacher education programmes address the critical challenges facing education in South Africa that emanate from the legacy of apartheid. These critical challenges include incorporating situational and contextual elements that support teachers in developing competences that enable them to deal with diversity and transformation (DHET, RSA, 2015:s. 2.4). Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016:111) single out disproportions in relation to “the provisioning in higher education, as well as with regard to the social, educational and cultural capital of students entering and exiting the system.” Infusing situational and contextual elements of social justice matters in the curriculum has the potential to contribute to the promotion of diversity and transformation, which constitute foundations of a transformed curriculum from a social justice perspective.

The SPU BEd programme

In response to the aforementioned policy frameworks, coupled with the need for a transformed curriculum to address the apartheid-induced need for social justice in the higher education space, the SPU, one of the post-apartheid universities, responded to the challenges by commencing with a re-curriculated BEd programme in 2014. In an attempt to promote social justice, the SPU adopted a vision statement that aims to enhance “democratic practice and social justice in society” (SPU, 2015:11). Through this vision, the SPU hopes to develop graduating “citizens [who are] competent and capable to realise the aspirations of society.”

According to Ukpokodu (2007), it is important that a transformed teacher education programme should ensure that educators of student teachers are committed to self-transformation and social justice, offer modules on social justice, integrate social justice across the programme and advance vehement efforts to diversify the faculty and student teachers. Heybach’s (2009) perspectives of social justice was useful, as it contends that social justice has the proclivity to

uncover and adjust systemic oppression usually preserved in institutions such as universities.

Subsequently, with this notion, the all-encompassing aim of the BEd curriculum was to develop graduates who would start their teaching careers having completed an intellectually challenging and transformed curriculum. This transformed curriculum is intended to develop student teachers’ content knowledge, pedagogical skills, management expertise, and especially, their ability to function and apply their knowledge in a socially just educational context. To this end, Bowen (2014) advises that a socially just educational context should be characterised by efforts to empower marginalised communities and deconstruct unjust institutional arrangements. Therefore, it is only by advancing efforts to realise the aforementioned characteristics that actual social change, and the concomitant beneficial advances of the marginalised, will find expression in institutions – which is the ultimate goal of social justice. Thus, student teachers are enabled to develop into agents of social justice in a democratic South Africa.

Becoming agents of social justice presents student teachers with new challenges. For student teachers, it means taking charge of their own learning so that they are able to construct the meaning of theories of justice in ways that will enable them to demonstrate specific applied competencies in a socially just classroom context. In keeping with the aim of the study, namely exploring how student teachers perceive and experience the promotion of social justice, we selected three modules from the BEd curriculum for student teachers to reflect on. The modules are offered over a 3-year period, each offered for a year and include a module from their first, second and third years of study.

Aligning lecturers’ teaching practices with the vision of SPU

SPU was established in 2014 without the scars of “previously disadvantaged or historically White or bush university” (SPU, 2013:6). The perception was that it would be easier to focus on the transformational objectives of Higher Education (HE), since the new university was free from the remnants of apartheid. SPU can thus be viewed as a symbol of a new democratic South Africa, as reflected in its vision: “A university critically engaged in learning, research and development – while enhancing democratic practices and social justice in society” (SPU, 2015:11) However, each lecturer, consciously or unconsciously, brings his or her own embedded history, culture, biases and prejudices to the university context. In an endeavour to arrest the latter, teacher educators meet regularly to ensure that their teaching

practices and interaction with students are aligned with the vision of the university. The candid nature of these sessions allows the opportunity for each teacher educator to interrogate and reflect on their own views, as well as that of their peers. These sessions have the added advantage of sensitising teacher educators about their own prejudices and stereotypes that they may take to their respective classrooms. This further helps teacher educators to see each of their students for who they are. The aforementioned ties in with Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel and Tlale's (2015) view that teachers (and lecturers) constantly need to align their own beliefs to the principles of the Constitution.

Description of modules selected for the study

A brief description of the three modules selected for the study will now be provided. *The individual in the learning context* is a first-year module, mandatory for all BEd students at the SPU. This module is framed within a social justice context and part of the transformed curriculum. The overarching aims of the module are, firstly, to aid student teachers to become critically aware of the society in which they live, secondly, to identify and develop a deeper understanding of discrimination and the marginalisation of people and, thirdly, to understand how oppression is structured and maintained. Transforming an education system implies provoking stakeholders to be critical so that they are able to function within a democratic society (November, 2010).

In the second year, the module, *Inclusive teaching and learning*, is offered, which aims to prepare student teachers with the knowledge and skills to identify barriers to learning. The module is intended to enable them as future teachers to address these barriers and to create an inclusive classroom context. In their third and fourth years, student teachers are at liberty to choose one of the following modules: *Conversational languages, Setswana, Afrikaans, isiXhosa* or *Sign language*. The conversational modules aim to assist student teachers, as non-native speakers of the language, to interact with people across various cultures. A further aim of this module is to ensure that this cross-cultural interaction transpires respectfully, with student teachers appreciating their own linguistic and cultural background as well as the language and culture of others.

In this study, we explore the potential of these modules to promote social justice among student teachers over a 3-year period.

Theoretical Framework

Social justice pedagogy can be explored through various theoretical frameworks – the critical race theory (Yosso, 2005), identity development (Tatum, 2013) and socialisation (Harro, 2010). Dover (2013) identifies various components of

social justice education, namely critical pedagogy and multicultural, culturally responsive, democratic and human rights education. All these components address important values of diverse relationships. In this study, we used Dover's (2013) lens for social justice pedagogy, which incorporates democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education and culturally responsive education. The following is a brief description of each of the four components of Dover's lens for social justice pedagogy.

Democratic education or progressive education focuses on the civil functions of schooling (Dover, 2013). Dewey (2007) emphasises the importance of learning through experience, where pedagogical engagement assists students to develop into democratic citizens. Through dialogue and social interaction, students realise their stereotypical assumptions and develop an agency for social justice. Parker (2010) also acknowledges the importance of democratic education to develop students' agency.

Freire's (1990) *critical pedagogy* focuses on raising the socio-political consciousness of students by examining unequal power relations. Crucial to critical pedagogy is investigating social-political power relations and the creation of knowledge. Freire (2002:35) describes this process as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." Critical pedagogy has a distinct social justice agenda. Through co-investigation, dialogue and discussions, students develop their socio-political consciousness. By way of self-criticism and self-consciousness, students critique unequal power relations in society (Giroux, 2010). This moral judgement assists students to act as agents of change.

Multicultural education recognises oppressive practices and deals with it through justice pedagogy. Multicultural education developed in reaction to the Black civil rights movement of the nineteen sixties (Sleeter & Grant, 1999). The social-political perspective pays tribute to racially diverse heroes and holidays. Banks and McGee Banks (2010) highlight that multicultural education acknowledges that all students, irrespective of their race, class, gender or culture, will have an equal chance to learn. The past few years have shown a shift in multicultural education to social action and a critical approach. Multicultural social justice education focuses more on oppression and structural inequality and seeks to reconstruct society towards greater equity with regard to race, class, gender, religion and disability (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Culturally responsive education recognises the history and culture of learners. It, therefore, integrates critical pedagogy and multicultural education. Gay (2010:31) defines culturally

responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective” for students. Ladson-Billings (2009:20) describes culturally responsive teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically [because it uses] cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.” Central to culturally responsive education are teacher identity and student performance. Culturally responsive pedagogy addresses teachers’ assumptions and biases as well as their classroom techniques (Sleeter, 2013). By acknowledging the embedded history and culture of learners, culturally responsive teaching enhances social justice in the classroom.

Research Design

In this study, we intended to explore how student teachers perceived and experienced the promotion of social justice in each of the three selected modules over a 3-year period. We employed a qualitative research design with an interpretivist approach in an attempt to realise the aim and objectives of the study. For Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011), qualitative research is useful in that it provides an exhaustive understanding of the research matters from the perspective of the participants, based on their lived experiences. The qualitative research method was therefore appropriate, since we were interested in obtaining a thorough understanding of the perceptions and experiences of student teachers in relation to the promotion of social justice in university modules. The qualitative methodology is also in accordance with our assumption that reality is socially constructed and that research can only be done through the interaction of the researchers and the participants (cf. Creswell, 2014).

An interpretivist approach enabled us to interpret and understand the subjective worlds of the participants as they experienced it (cf. Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). We required of student teachers to write narratives describing their experiences and perspective of three modules spread over a period of 3 years. Narratives, by their very nature, are subjective. The interpretivist approach was therefore well suited for the purpose of this study, as our intention was to understand and interpret the subjective world of the student teachers. The subjective worlds, in this instance, refer to the student teachers’ perceptions and experiences in modules designed to promote social justice.

Participants

The following four participants were involved in the study: Astrid, a White, English-speaking student; Jodene, a Coloured (the term used for people of multiracial heritage in South Africa),

English-speaking student; Thato, a Black, Setswana-speaking student; and William, a White Afrikaans-speaking student. William, Astrid and Jodene attended a multicultural school. The majority of learners in Thato’s school were Setswana-speaking, while the majority of learners in Astrid’s school were Afrikaans-speaking. William, Astrid and Jodene hail from middle-class backgrounds. Thato, on the other hand, is from a poor family, residing in a township (a geographical area on the outskirts of the city reserved for predominantly Black and other non-White communities displaced during apartheid).

Endeavouring to capture the experiences of the SPU student teachers, we selected four participants in their first year of study, based on their diversity. Diversity in the context of the study refers to various social identity components, such as race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class and religion, among others. The rationale behind the aforementioned criteria was informed by the university’s vision, where democratic practices, social justice and inclusivity are used as mechanisms to ensure that diversity is reflected in their student population (SPU, n.d.). We used purposeful selection, drawing on the university demographic statistics, which is representative in terms of race, gender and language. In this regard, we worked from the premise that a diverse group of students will be in a position to provide rich information in relation to the topic (cf. Creswell, 2014). The participants comprised of four students, two males and two females. Furthermore, the participants were also diverse in terms of their racial identity and language. The anticipated outcome of this study was to determine how students across the aforementioned identity categories experienced and perceived social justice issues in the curriculum.

Since participants were selected in their first year of study, it was impossible to predict which conversational modules they would choose in their third year of study.

Table 1 Selection of participants

Participant	Race	Gender	Language
Jodene	Coloured	Female	English
Astrid	White	Female	English
Thato	Black	Male	Setswana
John	White	Male	Afrikaans

Data Generation and Analysis

The data used in this article were generated over 3 years using three reflective narratives. The three reflections took place at the end of each of the respective modules, over the 3-year period. The participants were, however, not provided with specific questions to guide their reflection. Instead, they were simply requested to write a reflection of their perception and experiences of modules designed to promote social justice.

The reflective exercises allowed the participants the opportunity to be the authors of their own stories and to give a voice to their experiences (cf. Park, 2013). Through reflection, perceptions and experiences were recalled, reconsidered, retold and analysed. Reflection entails introspection and helps the individual to gain a better understanding of his or her place in the social world. As a meaning-making process, reflection can thus lead to insight into past experiences (Moon, 2004). The narratives were analysed to understand the meanings that the participants linked to their perceptions and experiences of the modules. The students gave written consent for their participation in the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Ethical clearance to conduct the research was granted by the SPU.

Narrative Results on Perceptions of Social Justice

In the following section, we present the students' perceptions of social justice based on their experiences of the three modules on which they reflected.

The Individual in the Learning Context

For Astrid, the module assisted her to be "*more comfortable and eager to engage with someone that is different.*" She stated that the module had taught her "*about the different levels that oppression can occur on and that in many ways it is a word born out of institutions.*" This is in accordance with Zeichner's (2011) view that a transformed curriculum should contribute to the eradication of inequalities. Astrid pointed out that it was "*during the group work sessions where I was exposed to various perspectives on oppression*" that she learnt more. The interaction and collaboration among individuals from different cultural and language groups illustrate visible signs of democratic education for Astrid (cf. Dover, 2013). Listening to different stories of oppression has given Astrid a better understanding of otherness and to become aware of her own biases. Astrid's experiences of the module are in line with multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching.

Thato indicated that the module had given him "*a better understanding of who*" he was. He said the phases of oppression "*open[ed] my eyes and gave me a better understanding of the world around me.*" The new information on racism and diversity helped him "*to change my perception on race and killed those stereotypes.*" Attending a class with people who were bisexual, transgender and heterosexual "*has led me to understand other genders and treat them the same.*" Thato reflected more on the different forms of oppression in his community. He believes that the module assists

students to move out of their comfort zones to a learning zone. For Thato, learning about the other is a continuous process to "*get more understanding*" of the social world we live in. Thato's experience of the module is aligned with Freire's critical pedagogy (1990) of raising socio-political mindfulness by probing unequal power relations. With his new knowledge of diversity, Thato has become more conscious of different forms of oppression, and by ending assumptions about and prejudice towards others, he can act as a change agent.

William has learnt about the "*various forms of oppression and how it is structured in society.*" He indicated that the module helped him to be more aware of "*the various factors and actions that contribute to oppression.*" William has become more conscious of the students' backgrounds. He has realised that knowledge of the other will lead to a better understanding of diversity. William believes that "*one form of oppression is not worse than another.*" This has made him more aware of the actions and privileges that he may have over other people. This corresponds with culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural teaching, which acknowledge the stereotypical assumptions and biases of teachers (Sleeter, 2013).

Jodene, on the other hand, attended a multicultural school and had the opportunity to interact with learners from different backgrounds before she joined the SPU. She felt the module was "*like a life orientation class.*" Jodene mentioned that what she had been taught in the module was what she had "*been taught in high school and ... [had] come to discover myself.*"

All the participants, except Jodene, had positive experiences of the module, which contributed to a better understanding of social justice. The narratives of Astrid, Thato and William indicate that the overarching aims for the module, *The individual in the learning context*, were met. The module assisted the three participants to reflect critically on the society in which they lived and how oppression was structured and maintained with regard to the individual, the institutional and societal level (cf. November, 2010).

Inclusive Teaching and Learning

Astrid reported that this module exposed her to "*all of the different types of learning barriers that occur – some as a result of social injustice.*" As an example, she referred to the effect that "*foetal alcohol syndrome can have on a child's cognitive function.*" Astrid pointed out that alcoholism and poverty were rife in South Africa, and the module reminded her of "*how unequal our country still is.*" Her perception of social, political and economic paradoxes in society suggests the genesis of a socio-political consciousness awakening. Her perception of and tendency towards change agency

tie in with the fundamental principles of critical pedagogy.

Furthermore, Astrid regards her lecturer as her role model, because she engages with all her students – “*She has extensive knowledge in barriers to learning and is very accepting towards all people, despite their differences.*” Her remarks in this regard allude to a democratic education, where, according to Dewey (2007) and Westheimer and Kahne (2004), learning is a hands-on pedagogical engagement that contributes to developing democratic citizens (Parker, 2010).

Jodene experienced the module, *Inclusive teaching and learning*, as “*the most interesting module and beneficial for future educators.*” The module helped her to understand that “*even if you are at a disadvantage you are still entitled and you still have a right just like everyone else to an education.*” She experienced the module as liberating, since it assisted her to relinquish the stereotypical notion that only the privileged are entitled to an education, which attests to the underpinnings of democratic education (cf. Parker, 2010). She realised that learning barriers did not only occur in special needs schools. The module has helped her not only to identify learning barriers but also to know how to address the problem. According to Jodene, the module “*has also shown us how to include learners in different types of ways such as accommodating the learning styles of learners.*” Jodene’s remarks of how the module has helped her to acquire pedagogical skill and strategies to structure learning in an inclusive fashion compare favourably with the underlying principles of culturally responsive education (cf. Dover, 2013; González, N, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Thato believes that teachers should be able to analyse the teaching context and “*identify any possible factors that could contribute to learners not reaching their full potential.*” Thato’s statement highlights the imperatives of culturally responsive education on the matter that “*culturally responsive pedagogy places as much emphasis on teachers’ stances as their techniques*” (Dover, 2013:5). His statement further latches on to Dover’s (2013) view towards culturally responsive teachers, who she insists are sensitive to prevailing classroom practices.

Thato also admitted that he had become more aware of education policies for special needs. The module additionally deals with teaching strategies to ensure effective teaching for “*ADHD [Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] learners, learners displaying challenging behaviour, learners with learning impairments and gifted learners.*” Thato has learnt that each barrier needs special attention and specific treatment on how to address it in class, for example, through setting classroom rules, organising assignments and making seating arrangements. Thato’s interpretation of the policies

for special needs bodes well with that of both multicultural and democratic education, which focus on the actual circumstances of the learner and nurtures a sense of service and appropriate skills that will aid meaningful participation in society (cf. Dover, 2013).

William learnt about inequalities in the South African schooling system. This sensitised him to be “*more aware of challenges that learners might face in the learning environment and how to approach these challenges.*” William’s observation identifies with the challenges accentuated by both the critical pedagogy and multicultural education, where many learners from economically impoverished backgrounds are habitually under-taught because of the supposition that they are “*behind*” (Sleeter, 2013:2). Exposure to the module and being placed in a special school for teaching practice served as an awakening for wanting to support learners with learning difficulties. He became aware of “*his calling to make a difference especially for learners who can’t defend themselves. This module opened my eyes to the value of positive teaching*”. In this regard, multicultural education advises that teachers should avoid the “*deficit interpretation*” (Sleeter, 2013:15) of learners. William lamented “*the cruelty of humankind.*” He finally declared that exposure to the module, the passion of his lecturer and the time spent at the special school during teaching practice had changed his outlook on life. The aforementioned concurs with what is valued by culturally responsive education. The stance in culturally responsive education is that teachers should be explicitly trained to interfere with social and educational inequality (Dover, 2013).

Conversational Language

For Astrid, the conversational language module has exposed her to social justice in a way that was entirely unfamiliar to her. Astrid chose sign language as her conversational language, through which she was exposed to “*not only the language, but stories of years and years of oppression on the Deaf community and what it means to be a member of the Deaf community.*” She regarded her new knowledge about the triumphs that this community had made as a perfect exposure to social justice. She has also gained an immense amount of respect for the deaf. For Astrid, the module assisted her to be critically conscious of the challenges of the Deaf community. Her awareness of the marginalised Deaf community helped her to develop as an agent of change and aligned her experience of the module with critical pedagogy.

The conversational language that Jodene chose was Setswana. Jodene reported that the module assisted students to be more accommodating with regard to language diversity. Choosing this language helped her realise the

difficulty experienced by non-English or Afrikaans-speaking students at universities. By taking this module, she felt that “*I have in a way put myself in the shoes of a Setswana speaking student who does not really understand English all too well.*” The module also helped her to appreciate the Setswana culture, as “*it is not only a unique culture but a unique language as well.*” In accordance with culturally responsive and multicultural education, Jodene started to acknowledge the history and culture of her classmates. By learning some of the linguistics pertaining to Setswana, Jodene is able to communicate, though not fluently, with her Setswana peers in and outside of class. She observed that the Setswana students were “*appreciative and respectful of the fact that I am at least trying to meet them halfway by learning to speak in their native tongue.*”

Thato chose conversational Afrikaans. During his first and second years, Thato was irritated when students would code switch from English to Afrikaans. Having to study and learn a completely new language has been very challenging because “*when you learn the language it comes with its customs and culture.*” The module supported him to be “*involved in a conversation with someone fluent in the language.*” Although not fluent in Afrikaans, Thato has learnt a lot about the language and its customs. In the process, his attitude towards Afrikaans and Afrikaans-speaking people has also changed. Thato’s experience of the module correlates with multicultural education, which concedes that all learners have an equal chance to learn (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010), as well as that of culturally responsive teaching that recognises the entrenched history, culture and language of learners (Sleeter, 2013).

William opted to take conversational Setswana. He noted that the conversational language module helped students to be more accommodative towards language diversity at the SPU. He mentioned that English was the medium of instruction, while Setswana was the language spoken by the majority of the students. In his first and second years, William observed tension among students from different language groupings as code switching occurred among English, Afrikaans and Setswana. While code switching excludes and marginalises students, the aim of the *Conversational language* modules is to be inclusive towards language diversity. William found that students “*appreciate it and relate more to you if you can speak their language.*” His experience of the modules is in accordance with culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education.

Limitations

Only one method of data generation was used, namely reflection exercises. We do, however,

concede that more data gathering methods could have been used to increase the credibility and validity of the study. However, the data were generated over 3 years and checked and verified by two researchers. Notwithstanding this limitation, the study resulted in important findings for teacher education.

Findings and Discussion

In this study we focused on a transformed curriculum that envisages promoting social justice. As advocated by Francis and Le Roux (2011), all student teachers should have an understanding of the connections between race, class, gender and other social identities. Social justice education will prepare student teacher for the complexities of a diverse classroom. The narratives demonstrate what student teachers’ understanding of social justice were and whether the modules have supported them in accomplishing this understanding. As the study is framed around Dover’s (2013) work on social justice pedagogy, we accordingly attempted to analyse the narratives from the perspectives of democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education and culturally responsive education. A summary of the findings per module follows.

All four participating student teachers indicated that they found the module, *The individual in the learning context*, helpful, as it assisted them to gain a better understanding of oppression at various levels and how it is structured in society. The module also made them aware of their own biases, prejudices and stereotypes. Agustin, Djoehaeni and Gustiana (2021) warn that stereotypes and prejudice frequently transects with gender-based biases that may even result in violence.

This awareness served as a catalyst for them to want to change. The latter aligns with the views of both Freire (1990) and Parker (2010) on critical pedagogy, where students develop a socio-political consciousness.

Most of the students reported finding the module, *Inclusive teaching and learning*, valuable. They, however, pointed out that the module succeeded in emphasising the inequalities that still existed in the South African society. One student revealed that she had become more accepting of people, irrespective of their cognitive, physical or other differences. A similar study conducted with university students in Iceland, where inclusive practices were implemented, revealed that “students with barriers are not only tolerated” but accepted by their school community (Björnsdóttir, 2017:134).

She firmly believes that all people have the right to an education. Another student mentioned how he had since become aware of his calling to make a difference in the lives of those marginalised

because of an unequally structured society. Most of the students also valued the skills with which the module has equipped them. They will now be able to draw on these skills when selecting teaching and learning strategies to ensure optimal learning for learners with learning barriers. The former sentiments are consistent with the views of some scholars in the field, who tend to adopt a socio-ecological approach, and who contend that there should be a correlation between learners' competencies and environmental demands (Echeita Sarrionandia, Simón Rueda, Márquez Vázquez, Fernández Blázquez, Pérez de la Merced & Moreno Hernández, 2017; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Walker, DeSpain, Thompson & Hughes, 2014). The same scholars point out that educational systems should adjust to and reach all learners – and not the other way around.

One student indicated that he no longer viewed learners with barriers to learning as having a deficiency but rather as learners who came to their classes with their own knowledge and lived experiences. Students' responses in relation to the inclusive teaching and learning module are congruent with that of a multicultural education, that strives to ensure more equity (Grant & Sleeter, 2007), as well as the recognition of all learners (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010). Multicultural education is holistic and authentic, and prepare students to be sensitive towards others while cultivating a "positive attitude to cultural diversity" (Le Roux & Möller, 2002:187).

The findings reveal that being exposed to the *Conversational language* module has proven rather advantageous to all four students. This means that they were moved out of their comfort zones and had to place themselves in the shoes of speakers of a language different from their own. A sign language student indicated that for the first time she had become aware of the marginalisation of the Deaf community. As a result of this, she has decided to become an agent of change to advance the struggle of the Deaf community. An English-speaking student has become aware of the disadvantage that English second language students experienced as the language of instruction was English only. This meant that such students were doubly disadvantaged. Firstly, they had to try to make sense of the language before they could attempt to comprehend the learning content. The students also alluded to the fact that engaging in a conversational language also allowed them a glimpse into the culture and customs of the native speakers. Two students indicated that attempting to converse with native speakers in their language, even though not fluently, contributed to social cohesion. The conversational modules prepared the students for a multilingual classroom. Although they were not fluent in the conversational language, the new language skills may assist the student to

code-switch to Setswana or Afrikaans, during lesson presentations. To this end, Maluleke (2019) aptly indicates that code-switching is an empowerment strategy to improve learners' subject knowledge and to build a relationship with learners.

These findings suggest consistency with a culturally responsive education where students use cultural knowledge, history, language and lived experiences to make learning encounters with their culturally diverse peers more meaningful (Gay, 2010:31; Ladson-Billings, 2009:20). The three modules offered by SPU aligns with Engelbrecht et al.'s (2015) recommendation that Initial Teacher Education programmes should be structured in such a way that it prepares future teachers for the challenges of diverse classroom settings.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore how student teachers perceived and experienced the advancement of social justice in three modules offered in the SPU BEd programme over a period of 3 years.

Post-apartheid South Africa has made deliberate attempts to eradicate the inequalities in society as well as in higher education (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014). Several policies have envisaged to transform the curriculum and to ensure that social justice has been adapted in higher education institutions. The SPU, as a post-apartheid, democratic university, responded by offering a BEd programme that is underpinned by transformation and social justice. In the study, four students were selected to reflect on three modules that they had studied over a 3-year period. They were not provided with any guiding questions. They simply had to write a narrative of their perceptions and experiences of the modules which was analysed through a social justice pedagogy lens. The narrative analysis revealed that the students had developed a critical understanding of the inequalities still prevalent in the society and schooling system. The students resolved that these inequalities were mainly the result of unchallenged, time-honoured social constructs, bias and stereotypical perceptions in relation to learners with barriers to learning and attitudes to marginalised languages. The narratives further showed the students' willingness of to become agents of change. Evidence of this is displayed by their willingness to acknowledge existing inequalities, their display of empathy for the marginalised, their determination to learn and attempt to converse in another language and their eagerness to master pedagogical skills to assist learners with learning barriers. This concurs with Bowen's (2014:52) view on social justice education in that it "involves increasing students' awareness of social inequalities, identifying the roles that individuals and institutions play in maintaining such

inequalities, and taking corrective action.” The narratives confirmed that the selected modules indeed promoted social justice. A future study including more modules is envisaged.

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Authors' Contributions

Emma Groenewald conducted all interviews. Anthony Mpisi transcribed the interviews. Both authors collaborated in the writing and review of the final manuscript.

Notes

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