

Considering Disability? A Review of Arts-Based Social Justice Pedagogies in Teacher Education

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**Abstract**

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As multiply marginalized students with disabilities spend more time in general education settings, it is increasingly vital that all new PreK- 12 teachers enter their classrooms prepared to teach all students in equitable, socially just ways. Because of its capacity to cultivate dispositions common to socially just educators, including critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and reflection, arts-based pedagogy has emerged as a promising approach for meaningfully addressing these issues in teacher education. To understand the impact of this approach as it is increasingly implemented, a systematic review of the literature yielded 16 studies, published between 2003 and 2019, focusing on arts-based social justice pedagogies in teacher education. Studies identified similar positive outcomes for preservice teachers—critical reflection leading to personal transformation, feelings of self-efficacy and agency, authentic empathy practice and perspective-taking, and community building between participants—but varied widely in underlying conceptions of social justice, with none including a critical stance on disability in their definitions. Arts-based pedagogical approaches to teaching social justice are promising,

but future work must begin from even stronger critical perspectives that engage directly with disability as a dimension of students' intersectional identities, if we are to prepare preservice teachers to work towards social justice in their future classrooms.

**Considering Disability? A Review of Arts-Based Social Justice Pedagogies in Teacher Education**

While classrooms today are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of ability, race immigration status, socio-economic status and other identities (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2018), the US population of K-12 teachers remains predominantly white, female, upper-middle class, and largely underprepared to instruct the youth from multiply marginalized backgrounds who enrich their classrooms (*Forward Together NCLD Report*, 2019). The term multiply marginalized, as used here, refers to students who represent members of two or more non-dominant identity groups (for example, disabled students of color). Drawing on Kimberle Crenshaw's foundational work, this matters because oppression (and privilege) is intersectional, meaning oppressions reinforce, intertwine, and impact one another in meaningful ways (Crenshaw, 1991). In light of the unexamined, pervasive, and harmful deficit narratives of disability that abound in schools and in teacher education (Cosier & Pearson, 2016) and the way ableism and racism collude to define and regulate what is considered "normal" in schools (S. A. Annamma et al., 2013), I argue we must attend particularly closely to disability in conversations about intersectional oppressions experienced by students in our rapidly diversifying classrooms.

This reality of schools' changing demographics has prompted widespread encouragement of teacher education programs to include social justice education in their curricula. Though social justice pedagogies are defined by different educators and scholars in a range of ways (Hackman, 2005), most are underpinned by Freire's notion of developing critical consciousness through engagement in praxis: an ongoing cycle of critical reflection and action towards social change (Freire, 1970). Through fostering burgeoning understandings of social injustice, privilege, and oppression as related to issues of race, class, gender, ability, and other

identity categories to which teachers and students may belong, social justice pedagogies strive to instill in educators both the commitments and tools necessary for enacting positive social change (Harman & McClure, 2011, p. 382).

Some teacher education programs have approached social justice education through arts-based pedagogical approaches, because they seem to promise an opportunity to meaningfully grapple with issues of social justice and identity while building skills and dispositions common to socially just educators (see Kraehe & Brown, 2011; Rosaen, 2003). Here, I define arts-based pedagogical approaches as teaching methods in which learners actively contribute to art-making processes. However, research into these approaches, like all arts equity research, tends to be siloed within specific disciplines and institutions, examined through different methodological frameworks, and discussed using different language (Kraehe et al., 2016). As scholars and educators interested in creating transformative, socially-just experiences for our teachers and students, we need to understand the different ways in which these approaches are functioning in PreK-12 teacher preparation programs. The purpose of this literature review is to examine studies on arts-based social justice pedagogical approaches in order to understand their scopes, impacts, and underlying social justice commitments, including whether and how they attend to disability as a crucial factor in students' experiences of social (in)justice at school.

In this section, I will acknowledge my own positioning before situating this conversation within the intersectional oppressions experienced by multiply marginalized disabled students in preK-12 classrooms. Next, I will explore the potential contributions of arts-based pedagogy to preservice teachers' social justice learning as they prepare to enter these students' lives as

advocates and allies. I will conclude with the research questions guiding this review. Because of my theoretical commitments, I will continually center and recenter the experiences of multiply marginalized disabled students (using identity-first and person-first language interchangeably to reflect variation in individual preferences), as I argue that arts-based pedagogy can speak back to ableism and its colluding oppressions but has been underleveraged in this regard.

### **Positionality Statement**

I come to this work as the younger sister of a disabled brother, a theater teaching artist and director passionate about working with students with disabilities, and a graduate student at a predominantly white research institution in the Pacific Northwest. As a white, cisgender, nondisabled woman in research, I am aware of my power and privilege in conversations about social justice in schools and commit to continually (re)centering the voices of scholars, activists, and self-advocates (represented here in theory and citations) who represent the identities of students most marginalized by our educational system.

### **Ableism and Intersectional Oppressions**

Any conversation about the dynamics of social (in)justice present in today's classrooms must include an analysis of the intersectional oppressions encountered by multiply marginalized students with disabilities, whether taught in inclusive or segregated settings. For these students, oppressions work in tandem to mark their bodies and minds as deviant with material consequences for their experience in schools. For example, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students are disproportionately assigned to special education services and, once assigned, are disproportionately punished and have worse educational outcomes when compared to their white peers (S. A. Annamma et al., 2013). Here, racism and ableism collude

to create experiences for disabled students of color that are qualitatively different from those of white disabled students.

One of the forces at play for these students, contributing to their inequitable experience of schooling, is their teachers' unexamined ableism. Using Talia "TL" Lewis's working definition, ableism is the "system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity... deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism" (Lewis, 2021). It comprises the systems, attitudes, and actions that create and sustain oppression against (but not exclusively against) disabled people, including implicit biases and deficit perspectives of disability (Sins Invalid, 2019).

Research shows that when educators hold deficit views of students with disabilities, when they assume based on disability labels that students are incapable of participating in certain ways or learning certain things, disabled students suffer. Deficit views influence both the effectiveness of teachers' instruction and the restrictiveness of student placement decisions (Bialka, 2015). Further, research shows that when teachers attribute students' learning difficulties to internal rather than external factors (i.e. a student's documented disability rather than a teacher's mode of instruction), they hold lower expectations for students and may be less likely to modify their instruction in ways that help students learn (Brady & Woolfson, 2008). In contrast, when educators push back on deficit views to adopt a strengths-based or anti-ableist approach grounded in social justice commitments, they teach in ways which evidence a belief in all students as capable, with positive consequences for students' learning outcomes (Ruppar et al., 2018).

This issue holds relevance for all preservice teachers, whether or not they intend to work in special education, in part because of the rising number of students with disabilities educated in inclusive settings, regular education classrooms in which students with disabilities and nondisabled students learn similar material alongside one another. In 2017, over 60% of students with disabilities in the US were spending over 80% of their time in regular education classrooms, and that percentage has been steadily increasing (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2018). Despite inclusive settings' rise in prevalence, in 2019, only 17% of K-12 public school teachers in the US felt very well prepared to teach students with disabilities in their classrooms, in part because they felt unprepared by their teacher education programs (*Forward Together NCLD Report*, 2019).

The United States' population of public school teachers is much more homogenous than that of its students. In the 2017-18 school year, only 21% of public school teachers were people of color, a statistic that increased only 5% from the 1999-2000 numbers (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2018). This is in contrast to the 52% of their students in the 2017-2018 school year, up 13% from 1999-2000, who were students of color (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2018). As Fierros (2009) argues, teacher educators must recognize this racial imbalance between teachers and students as a mandate to expose preservice teachers to meaningful multicultural, multiracial experiences (p. 4).

Data has not been collected on the percent of public school teachers who identify as disabled. However, given that (despite disabled teachers' proven capacity to promote educational excellence through challenging negative stereotypes, serving as positive role models for disabled and nondisabled students, and creatively adapting curriculum to suit all

students' needs) individuals with disabilities are the least represented minority group in the teaching profession (Neca et al., 2020), it seems safe to assume this percentage to be far lower than the 13.7% of public school students in the 2017-2018 school year served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (*Digest of Education Statistics*, 2018). As such, a similar call to action might be made for teacher preparation programs to include meaningful educational experiences on the topics of disability and ableism. All teachers must have the opportunity to examine their own assumptions and implicit biases around disability and imagine alternatives, so they may come to see disability an element of human difference that enriches—rather than detracts from— their classrooms (Bhukhanwala et al., 2017, p. 611). Such an understanding seems fundamental for teachers in inclusive contexts, but also for teachers in more segregated settings, as it may support them in better advocating for their students.

As structures of oppression meaningfully intersect to impact our students, I am most interested in teacher education that centers social justice learning by attending explicitly to ableism and racism as intersectional oppressions which are either reinforced or questioned and transformed by teacher-student interactions in the classroom (Kraehe & Brown, 2011 p. 494). Critical, asset-based perspectives are helpful here, two of which draw on aspects of Disability Studies (Linton, 1998), Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), and the ways these theories have been applied within education in dialogue (Erevelles, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) is one such framework that can help us understand how racism and ableism work interdependently to construct definitions of what is normal and what is deviant for students in schools (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). In this

paper, I draw specifically on two of DisCrit's seven tenets: the argument that, in our social justice work, we must center and uplift "counter-narratives," firsthand stories from those students most marginalized (p. 14), and the assertion that we must support diverse forms of community-led and informed resistance (p. 18). Through a DisCrit frame, resistance in schools must include transformative teacher resistance—resistance rooted in humility that reframes classroom contributions of disabled students of color as gifts evidencing their thoughtful, practiced resistance to dominant norms (Annamma & Morrison, 2018).

Within the specific context of dispositional development in teacher education, Bialka (2015) draws on Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory to propose instruction grounded in Critical Ability Theory (CAT), a framework for understanding one's own ability status and related power and privilege (p. 149). Teacher education grounded in CAT encourages teachers to become more conscious of their own identities and the dispositions (defined as the praxis of beliefs and actions) they bring to working with students labeled with disability. Without directly engaging with these issues, Bialka argues, preservice teachers tend to maintain deficit perspectives (not only of student ability, damaging as previously discussed), but of student race, which contributes to the persistent disproportionality in students assigned to receive special education services (p. 149).

While DisCrit offers a more nuanced, intersectional vision of what teachers working toward social justice might look like in the classroom, CAT offers a concrete roadmap for approaching this vision within the context of a teacher education program. Drawing on these theories in conversation highlights both the complexity of the challenge—preparing teachers to resist racism and ableism's intractable, intertwining classroom impacts in transformative

ways—and the specific kinds of self-reflexive practice that may be useful in meeting it, while crucially directing and redirecting focus back to the students most impacted by lived experiences of oppression in schools.

### **Arts as Pedagogical Resources for Social Justice Learning**

In looking to incorporate social justice learning in preservice teacher education—though recognizing how little is known about instructional strategies for effective social justice teaching (Kraehe & Brown, 2011)—some teacher preparation programs are turning to arts-based pedagogical approaches (see Bhukhanwala et al., 2017; Kraehe & Brown, 2011; Rosaen, 2003). The arts have the capacity to teach an array of skills, beliefs, and attitudes that connect directly to the social justice learning we hope to facilitate for pre-service educators, perhaps most strikingly as related to issues of disability. In addition to cultivating critical thinking, flexibility, creativity, and self-confidence, the arts validate a multiplicity of ways of seeing and interpreting the world (Eisner, 1998, p. 44). In other words, the arts disrupt harmful deficit perspectives through normalizing and celebrating differences in experience, perspective, and cognitive processes. This is an invaluable lesson for new teachers, especially as they prepare to enter inclusive settings.

Further, powerful arts experiences encourage not only cognitive, but also emotional engagement, allowing for meaningful encounters with others' (counter-) narratives (p. 45), as DisCrit suggests is essential to all justice work. Additionally, the arts recontextualize the familiar, helping us see things in a new way and exposing our underlying assumptions about the world, with potential to spur the process of critical self-reflection and personal transformation (p. 47) called for in educators by Critical Ability Theory.

With specific relevance for teachers preparing to work with multiply marginalized students with disabilities, the arts demonstrate that our depth of understanding is not limited by the language we use (Eisner, 1998, p. 45) and, as a result, encourages us to be open to the contributions of others, regardless of their linguistic capabilities (Greene, 2013, p. 252). Also, from a practical standpoint, all art forms are more or less inherently multimodal and multisensory; with a few strategic moves, arts-based pedagogy can leverage this to model experiences grounded in multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement, the guiding principles behind Universal Design for Learning, a framework designed to improve curriculum accessibility (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). Arts-based pedagogy creates space for learning to look, sound, and/ or feel different for different people in a way that enhances, rather than threatens, the group learning experience and so models this dimension of what social justice might look like for students with disabilities in the classroom.

Despite the promise of arts-based pedagogical approaches for teaching social justice, such programs in teacher preparation are limited, often siloed within their particular settings, and vary widely in kind, quality, and outcome. In kind, programs vary by several factors: by specific art form, from drama to visual art to creative writing, by duration and structure, from a one-day workshop to a full year sequence and everything in between, and by the level and type of collaboration required from students, from independent work, to collaborations between preservice teachers, and finally to collaborations between preservice teachers and groups of young people resembling their future students. This last variation is relevant as a program in which preservice teachers independently write poetry may offer a different learning experience from one in which preservice teachers collaborate on a group poem, and both programs may

differ widely from one in which preservice teachers and students in a school placement co-author a poetry collection. In quality, programs vary by the strength of their conception of social justice, from a cursory celebration of diversity to deep engagement with intersectional identities and oppressions, and the expertise of teacher educators in both teaching social justice and in the art form being leveraged for this purpose. These variations underlie variations in reported outcomes, encompassing both degrees of transformative learning for preservice teachers and some unintentional negative impacts.

### **Research Questions**

Responding to the siloed nature of knowledge in the area of arts-based social justice pedagogies in teacher education, this systematic literature review will synthesize what is known by exploring the following questions:

1. What kinds of arts-based pedagogical approaches to teaching social justice are teacher education programs implementing?
2. How do researchers, themselves teacher educators, conceive of social justice, and how might these conceptions influence their claims about what participants learn through these approaches?
3. Do these approaches leverage the promise that arts-based pedagogy offers for attending specifically to issues of disability, ableism, and its intersections with other oppressions? If so, how?

## Methodology

### Search Methods

I conducted a three-phase systematic review of the literature, consisting of (1) a search through electronic databases, (2) consultation with experts in the field, and (3) application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, to yield the 16 studies included in this review.

In phase one, I conducted an initial search through ERIC, APA PsycInfo, and Education Source using the following sets of keywords. First, I chose to search for studies containing the phrases using \* as wildcards *"soc\* just\* and "arts-based pedagog\*" or "arts-based teaching" or "arts-based learning" or "arts-inte\* pedagog\*" or "arts-inte\* teaching" or "arts-inte\* learning."* I chose to focus on studies referencing "teaching," "learning" or "pedagogy" specifically to exclude studies where art was used primarily as a research method and not as a teaching tool and used *inte\** to specifically target a body of literature on arts-integration. Second, I added an abstract search for the keywords *"teacher education" or "preservice teacher\*" or "pre-service teacher\*" or "teacher candidate\*."* I chose to limit these keywords to mentions in each study's abstract, as before I did so, my search yielded an abundance of results with brief mentions of possible implications for teacher education in their conclusions. Finally, I excluded studies with the keywords *"preservice art teacher\*" or "pre-service art teacher\*."* I was not interested in reading work focused narrowly on preparing future arts educators, but rather work on how the arts might be valuable to all preservice educators in their learning processes. Adding this exclusion to my search criteria eliminated many studies that siloed the arts as a tool only to be used with future arts educators. This initial search, limited to articles published in peer-reviewed journals, yielded 13 results.

In phase two, I consulted with experts in the field. This process added 6 new articles to my results. After reading the abstracts of these articles, I revised my database search to include theater of the oppressed (keyword *“theat\* of the oppressed”* to capture both spellings of *theater/theatre*) as a substitute for arts-based or arts-integrated pedagogy, teaching, or learning. After this phase, my article count stood at 27, encompassing 22 results from this revised database search and 5 not represented in my electronic search results but suggested by experts.

In phase three, I read abstracts and applied the following inclusion and exclusion criteria. In the event that two or more papers on the same study showed up in the search, I excluded all but the most recent paper to avoid double counting the study. Also excluded were studies on non-participatory methods (for example, creating art for preservice teachers to view) as they did not meet my definition of an arts-based pedagogical approach, studies that did not explore a specific arts-based approach to teaching, studies whose primary subjects were not preservice PreK-12 educators, and studies wherein the primary goal was not teaching social justice but rather developing preservice teachers’ skill at art instruction, validating alternate forms of knowledge, or learning about stakeholders’ dreams for the future of education. At the end of this phase, I had my final list of 16 articles, all published in peer reviewed journals between 2003 and 2019, to review.

### **Data Analysis**

In relationship to my three research questions, I coded each article for the kind of program described, including its primary art form leveraged and the level and type of collaboration it required from preservice teachers, how researchers, themselves teacher

educators, characterized preservice teachers' learning experiences in the study, coding emergent themes of strengths and weaknesses, and how researchers understood what was meant by social justice teaching, noting specific mention of disability or ableism.

### ***Coding for Art Form and Level of Participation***

I used four codes to capture each study's primary art form, understood as the art form reflected in roughly >75% of instruction: theater and drama (and its subcategory theater of the oppressed), creative writing, and multiple methods, a code used when multiple art forms were used with none dominating the roughly >75% of instruction required to be considered primary. I used three codes to capture the variation in level and type of collaboration required of preservice teachers in each study: partial peer collaboration, defined as requiring mostly independent work with some sharing of work with peers, peer collaboration, defined as requiring meaningful collaborations between preservice educators and including some possible sharing of work with young people, and peer-student collaboration, defined as requiring meaningful collaborations between preservice educators and young people resembling their future students.

### ***Coding for Social Justice Approach and Participants' Learning***

I grouped articles by their understanding of social justice into four coded categories: "superficial," "narrowly-focused or non-specific," "intersectional," and "comprehensive and transformative." Not every article explicitly defined what they meant by social justice; I understood this as an indicator of the centrality of social justice to each article's purpose and factored this into my coding.

Articles coded as having a “superficial” understanding of social justice failed to explicitly mention any forms of oppression (racism, ableism, sexism, xenophobia, etc.) or anti-oppression, stayed on the surface, and took an individual as opposed to systems approach, advocating for an appreciation of diversity without recognizing structural oppression. Articles coded as “narrowly-focused or non-specific” demonstrated an intermediate understanding of social justice by mentioning just one form of oppression or anti-oppression and/ or including in an otherwise more surface-level understanding the importance of critical reflection on one’s own power and privilege. Articles coded as “intersectional” demonstrated an even stronger understanding of social justice by mentioning two or more forms of oppression or anti-oppression and/or providing a strong analysis of intersectionality followed by specific steps individuals might take towards dismantling these oppressions.

In addition to these three understandings, I sought (but did not find) a fourth, “comprehensive and transformative” understanding. I argue that this understanding, though not yet evident in the literature, reflects an ideal to which future research in this area might aspire. Research reflecting this understanding would embrace all aspects of an “intersectional” understanding while—in line with DisCrit tenets— centering the voices of those most impacted, a group which must necessarily include voices from the (Black, Brown, queer) disabled community. Further, as called for by Critical Ability Theory, this research would evidence a commitment to helping preservice teachers examine and speak back to their own implicit deficit perspectives of multiply marginalized disabled students before entering the classroom.

Alongside these conceptions of social justice, I identified and coded for researcher-identified affordances and constraints in their participants’ learning through arts-based

approaches. Identified areas of learning included: habits of critical reflection to foster ongoing transformation (“critical reflection”), authentic empathy practice and perspective taking (“practicing empathy”), community building in and among preservice educators (“building community”), and strengthened feelings of self-efficacy and agency in relation to creating socially just classroom spaces (“self-efficacy”). In terms of learning limitations, I was interested in meaningful analysis of an approach’s capacity to effect change in participants that went beyond stating that studies could have been longer or faced challenges in getting preservice teachers to try arts-based approaches. I coded for two such meaningful analyses of limitations, including unintentional reinforcement of deficit perspectives (“deficit perspective”) and reification of teachers’ privilege (“reifying privilege”).

### ***Coding for Attending to Disability***

As I read, I coded for whether or not studies mentioned disability in their discussion. For those that did, I coded for the function of these mentions (from serving to exclude students with disabilities from the conversation to, I hoped, evidencing a commitment to anti-ableism or disability justice).

## **Results**

For a summary of all studies reviewed and coded, see appendix A.

### **Research Question 1: Arts-based social justice pedagogies in teacher education programs**

There was variation in arts-based pedagogical approaches to teaching social justice implemented and the types of collaboration they involved (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Articles Grouped by Primary Art Form and Type of Collaboration*

Primary Art Form	Type of Collaboration			Grand Total
	Peer Collaboration	Partial Peer Collaboration	Peer & Student Collaboration	
Creative Writing	0	1	0	1
Multiple Methods	1	2	1	4
Theater and Drama	10 (9 Theatre of the Oppressed)	0	1	11 (9 Theatre of the Oppressed)
Grand Total	11	3	2	16

Representing 11 of the 16 articles reviewed, theater and drama-based pedagogy emerged as the most common primary arts-based approach, always involving at least peer and sometimes peer-student collaboration. It is also noteworthy that 9 out of the 11 studies on theater and drama-based pedagogical approaches used teaching techniques drawing directly from Theatre of the Oppressed. This art form, developed by Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal, was created to raise participants' social consciousness and provoke imaginative responses to lived oppression through emphasis of problem-posing, critical reflection, dialogue amongst participants, and rehearsal for social change (Wooten & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2014, p. 182). Articles referenced both this approach as a whole and specific techniques from this approach—from tableau, where participants use their still bodies to create a single “stage picture,” to image theater, where multiple tableaux are arranged in sequence, to forum theater, where audience members to a scene are positioned as “spect-actors” and invited to step in and problem-solve interrupting a depicted oppression, to the Rainbow of Desire, a combination of these and other exercises to facilitate participants' exploration of internalized

oppression in particular— as important to their teaching methods (see Branscombe & Schneider, 2013; Powers & Duffy, 2016; Wooten & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2014).

Creative writing, the primary art form in only 1 of 16 articles, was the least common, though it is important to note that all studies coded as multiple methods included a writing component. Music and dance were not represented at all in the studies reviewed.

Few articles, 3 of the 16, required only partial peer collaboration of preservice educators in their program. The majority, 11 of the 16, required peer collaboration, while only 2 required more comprehensive peer-student collaborations. No article provided a thorough analysis of what they believed to be the impact of their required type of collaboration; more research is needed to better understand this area.

### **Research Question 2: Researchers' social justice conceptions and corresponding characterizations of their pedagogical approaches' strengths and weaknesses**

In my analysis of articles, I came to understand how researchers' conceptions of social justice were directly tied to their characterizations of what preservice teachers learned in their respective studies. Table 2 highlights these results.

**Table 2**

*Articles by Social Justice Conception, Emergent Strengths, and Meaningful Analysis of Weaknesses*

	Emergent Themes (Strengths)				Meaningful Analysis of Weaknesses
Conception of Social Justice	Self-Efficacy and Agency	Building Community	Practicing Empathy	Critical Reflection and Transformation	
Superficial (3 total)	3	2	3	0	0

Narrowly-focused or non-specific (3 total)	1	2	2	3	0
Intersectional (10 total)	0	4	4	8	5
Total	4	8	9	11	5

Varying across social justice conceptions, researchers characterized the strengths of their participants' learning through the following emergent themes: cultivating preservice teachers' increased sense of self-efficacy and agency, building community between participants or otherwise shifting established classroom dynamics in a positive way, creating space for authentic empathy practice and perspective taking, and fostering critical reflection leading to personal and collective transformation. I note that these positives reflect both studies' goals and their positive outcomes; studies cannot notice and do not highlight success in areas they overlook or identify as unimportant. Also varied across understandings of social justice was researchers' ability to meaningfully grapple with their own studies' weaknesses.

***Cross-Cutting Identified Strengths: Building Community and Empathy Practice***

Two strengths were commonly identified by scholars across social justice conceptions: building community and enabling authentic empathy practice and perspective taking among students.

**Building Community.** Eight articles identified building community between preservice teachers or otherwise shifting classroom dynamics in a positive way as a strength of their arts-based approach. These were evenly distributed across categories of social justice conceptualization, perhaps indicating some level of joy and connection inherent in art participation, regardless of an instructor's theoretical commitments or specific learning

objectives. Belliveau (2007) claimed, “A community of learners developed among the teachers and the four selected classrooms, where teamwork and respect were fostered” (p. 62). Fierros (2009) cited increases in preservice teachers’ motivation, saying, “students were motivated to engage in the ethnographic practices that go beyond what they normally encounter in their teacher education courses” ( p. 10). Finally, Harman and McClure (2011) spoke to the experience of one typically soft-spoken student in their arts-based program, saying “the support she felt during the performance galvanized her further into taking the floor for an extended time in the post-performance discussion, something which she had not done previous... ” (Harman & McClure, 2011, p. 393). These examples speak to arts-based pedagogical approaches’ capacity to build community and shift classroom dynamics in many positive ways.

**Authentic Empathy Practice and Perspective-Taking.** Also evenly distributed across varying levels of social justice conception were nine studies celebrating their approach’s success in providing space for authentic empathy practice and perspective-taking. As one example, Belliveau (2007) asserted, “The various drama-based activities appear to have helped students tap into their affective domain, which allowed them to feel what someone may experience in a bullying situation. As a result this encouraged empathy development among individuals and groups” (p. 55).

Other studies brought up both cognitive and kinesthetic (Stinson, 2004) dimensions of empathy practice, claiming, “in addition to emotional empathy, a number of participants made comments which indicate experiences of ‘cognitive empathy’: an appreciation of the intellectual position or beliefs of another. Such cognitive empathy is important for developing a

dialogic conception of truth and knowledge, itself an important aspect of socially just practice” (Boylan, 2009, p. 439). In regards to the kinesthetic, one article proposed, “this aspect of learning through embodied pedagogies may be understood through the related concept of kinaesthetic empathy, which accounts for the ways in which we might come to understand more of ourselves, others, and the world around us by recognising, and perhaps even experiencing within our own bodies, the bodily cues and responses of others” (Forgasz & McDonough, 2017, p. 58). One student who participated in producing a video about students’ experiences of race claimed that “through her embodied performance she was able “to see,” at least in part, from the position of another.” (Kraehe & Brown, 2011, p. 503).

Particularly as the articles celebrating empathy practice were evenly distributed across social justice conceptions—and respecting the well-justified and critical stance of disability studies scholars towards simulations (see Flower et al., 2007; Nario-Redmond et al., 2017)—it is important to maintain a level of skepticism around these claims. While some of these approaches may have responsibly navigated the tensions that arise when someone who is more privileged is asked to take the perspective of one more oppressed, some may have instead promoted false feelings of understanding disconnected from real attitudinal change and/or minimized experiences of oppression. It is beyond the scope of this review to understand in which, if in any, of these studies, claims of authentic empathy practice were justified and to what extent.

### ***“Superficial” Social Justice Conceptions and Characterized Learning***

Other characterizations of participants’ learning were clearly divided by researchers’ social justice understandings. Consider first the 3 studies evidencing a “superficial” conception

of social justice. In one such article by Mohan and Jepkemboi (2019), researchers identified a “deep understanding of diversity” in preservice teachers exemplified by their “[wearing] costumes that were identified with [a] country being researched” in a presentation to kindergarten students (p. 67). As is evident, the surface-level understanding of social justice reflected in this article led authors to applaud their students’ reinforcement of cultural stereotypes incompatible with a social justice agenda that addresses issues of inequities and oppression.

The three studies in this category, and one coded as “narrowly-focused or non-specific,” celebrated their approaches’ positive impact on teachers’ feelings of self-efficacy and agency to enact positive social change in their future classrooms. One article claimed, “most preservice teachers commented on how they gained confidence to try new things and how they saw possibilities for innovation in teaching” (Belliveau, 2007, p. 60). Another said, “In addition, they [preservice teachers] became more aware of their agency and voice, and felt empowered to take actions in their specific situations” (Bhukhanwala et al., 2017, p. 624). Perhaps this theme was only identified in studies with “superficial” or “narrowly-focused or non-specific” understandings of social justice because “intersectional” understandings of social justice led to teaching which emphasized the scope of oppressions that students face, leaving preservice teachers (rightly and more realistically) less confident in their ability to enact change.

Studies in this area identified limitations, but none went beyond cursory statements about student resistance to trying arts-based methods or regrettably short study timeframes to meaningfully analyze their own weaknesses.

***Narrowly-Focused or Non-Specific Social Justice Conceptions and Characterized Learning***

Three of the 16 studies reviewed evidenced “narrowly-focused or non-specific” social justice understandings. Brigham’s (2011) discussion of social justice teaching as including “developing critical thinking and reflection, fostering conditions for dialogue, critiquing larger social, economic and political structures, and challenging power hierarchies through informed social action” (p. 42) is an example of this intermediate view. The studies in this area represented a middle ground, with characterizations of preservice teacher learning found in both “superficial” and “intersectional” categories.

### ***Intersectional Social Justice Conceptions and Characterized Learning***

Ten of 16 studies reviewed demonstrated an “intersectional” conception of social justice. Boylan (2009) evidences through his claim that “expanding the curriculum to engage mathematically with issues of social justice such as gender or racial inequality, unequal distribution of income, sexuality or disability can lead to resentment or reveal oppressive beliefs and values” (p. 430) and subsequently that teaching “for social justice also entails the often uncomfortable emotionally demanding work of ongoing questioning of one’s own practices, beliefs and values and their relationship to social oppression” (p. 431). Boylan’s specific references to intersectional oppressions combined with a roadmap to the internal work needed to undo injustice beginning with critical self-reflection makes this example fall clearly in the “intersectional” category.

Studies in this category were the most likely to celebrate their approach’s capacity to foster some kind of critical reflection leading to personal and/or communal transformation. One article described participants as moving fluidly between artistically creating and critically reflecting, which “often led to new insights and powerful shifts... student teachers experienced

profound and empowering moments that led them to take actions toward transforming their thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and actions, and that created a more inclusive, democratic, and humane environment within their current context” (Bhukhanwala et al., 2017, p. 618). For example, in this study, participants (a cohort of preservice teachers in their last semester of student teaching) collaboratively created tableaux of their currently perceived and imagined ideal relationships with their host teachers. Students credited this activity with helping them recognize and name oppressive power dynamics, leading to conversations between student and host teachers that facilitated clearer communication and more equitable power sharing in the classroom (p. 619).

The significance of this reflexivity—this back and forth between making and reflecting, confronting reality and seeking to transform it—was echoed and extended by Branscome and Schneider (2013) in their discussion of how “tableau became a conduit for looking backwards and forwards... [they] claim drama to be an essentially activist literacy because it confronts reality while simultaneously seeking to transform reality.” (p. 109). Articles referenced transformation as “the result of being able to... critically reflect about issues...” (Desai, 2017, p. 233) and argued that “using our bodies to provoke critical dialogue can encourage participants towards transformative thinking” (McDermott et al., 2012, p. 16).

When it came to authors forming meaningful analyses of their own study’s weaknesses, a trend emerged. The stronger an article’s conception of social justice, the more nuanced were the critiques of their own teaching practices, identifying weaknesses and challenges that went deeper than student resistance to trying arts-based methods or limitations regarding the length of the study. Five studies with “intersectional” conceptions of social justice not only encouraged

critical reflection in preservice teachers but were critically reflexive themselves. A common critique was some studies' unintentional reinforcement of deficit perspectives. Harman and McClure (2011) identified this issue, explaining that "in the re-enactment of institutional conflicts in their schools and during post-performance discussions, teachers often perpetuated deficit discourses about students and parents" ( p. 387). Further, they claimed that "... the performance space provided catharsis and collaborative bonding but did not serve to push back against some of the macro-level factors that were informing the social construction of teachers and students in the classroom" ( p. 392).

Some studies acknowledged the unintentional reinforcement of racial power dynamics in peer collaboration. In regards to one such incident, Kraehe and Brown (2011) argued that "the collaborative space of inquiry failed to deliver on its empowering potential... there was a double silencing—once when [a student of color] felt he was unable to penetrate the white dominated discourse shared by the women in his group and again when he was denied creative agency to perform a counter-narrative" (p. 502).

Still other studies discussed unintended reification of white privilege or re-centering of (white) teachers in the narratives explored through arts-based pedagogy. For example, Powers and Duffy (2016) explain how one preservice teacher used language which "revealed how centered she remained in solving issues for her future students. Words like experience, solve, and challenge show her to be the main actor in the creation of an inclusive classroom. The difference between being the main actor and an ally is that allies cocreate alternatives with students. Main actors create solutions for them—solutions that might not be at all appropriate" (p. 68). Rosaen (2003) described her students' poetry collection as having white privilege and

cultural capital “embedded in the poetry,” left largely unexamined by her as a facilitator (p. 1462). Overall, in identifying and probing their own weaknesses, the subset of studies with an “intersectional” understanding of social justice went beyond merely advocating for to modeling the kind of critical reflexivity they hoped to cultivate in preservice teachers.

### **Research Question 3: Attending to Disability**

The concept of ableism was conspicuously absent from even the most intersectional conceptions of social justice found through this review. Even amongst articles coded as “intersectional,” only two mentioned disability at all and none included an explanation of ableism, anti-ableism, or disability justice in their social justice conceptions. In one article coded as “superficial,” disability was specifically excluded as an aspect of identity impacting students’ experiences of social justice.

Even among studies demonstrating a degree of critical reflexivity—even among those that acknowledged unintentional reinforcement of deficit perspectives, an issue known to impact students with disabilities—none asked questions about their own role in perpetuating ableist structures or excluding disability justice from the social justice agenda. As arts-based pedagogy can so meaningfully address issues relevant to students with disabilities, this was surprising. Perhaps this speaks to disability’s historical and enduring exclusion from conversations around civil rights and social justice and the unexamined ableism within social justice movements (Baynton, 2001).

### **Discussion**

Based on my synthesis of the literature, arts-based pedagogy is a promising tool for teaching social justice within teacher education programs. However, the small number of short-

term studies available for review, the variation in their teaching approaches and understandings of social justice, and the lack of meaningful engagement with issues of disability justice in this literature makes clear the need for future research and pedagogical innovation in this area.

### **Future Directions for Research**

Future research in this area must ask questions about the longer-term impact of arts-based approaches to teaching social justice in teacher education, addressing how these methods and experiences translate to teacher practice and ultimately student experience in the classroom. Answering such questions necessitates data collection over longer periods of time. Harman and McClure (2011) advocate for longitudinal studies which examine the impact of arts-based social justice pedagogies in teacher education through following preservice teachers into their first classroom placements to evaluate how they take up these approaches and to what effect for their students' learning. (Harman & McClure, 2011, p. 396).

Research must also critically consider role of collaboration in the work. This might look like inviting more collaboration between experts in social justice teaching and experts in art practice. It might look like more approaches emphasizing collaboration between preservice teachers and young people who resemble their future students, that then ask questions to understand how these kinds of experiences are different from purely peer collaborations. This idea, too, was expressed by some of the authors in this literature review. For example, Rosaen (2003), whose pedagogical approach was coded as a partial peer collaboration, expressed a worry that through not offering her students' the opportunity to read one another's' work, she may have limited their learning (p. 1474). She proposes future work which still affords students

the opportunity to create privately but also explicit opportunities for collaboration and peer learning to help students appreciate the value of multiple viewpoints (p. 1475).

I argue too that future research in this area must be explicitly grounded in theoretical frameworks-- such as DisCrit and Critical Ability Theory—that center the perspectives of multiply marginalized students with disabilities. It is not enough for our pedagogy to do this, our research must as well. Without embracing critical reflexivity for ourselves as researchers and teacher educators, we cannot hope to cultivate this key disposition for teaching in socially just ways in preservice teachers, no matter how skillful or well-implemented our arts-based pedagogy.

### **Future Directions for Arts-Based Social Justice Pedagogy in Teacher Education**

To realize the full potential of arts-based social justice pedagogies, teacher education programs must do several things. First, they must attend to the underlying conceptions of social justice that strengthen or weaken these approaches and insist on frameworks that bring light to the challenges that multiply marginalized students experience in inclusive classroom settings. Second, they must recognize that arts-based methods alone are not enough. Without scaffolding and critical reflexivity on the part of trained facilitators with expertise in both the art form being used and social justice teaching, art can fail to eliminate (and even reinforce) deficit perspectives. Like all forms of teaching, arts-based pedagogies are complicated and nuanced; they can be taught expertly, poorly, or somewhere in between, with real consequences for what students are able to learn (Forgasz & McDonough, 2017, p. 65). A possible antidote to unskilled instruction might be more collaborations between experts in social justice teaching and experts in specific arts-based teaching strategies. It was not possible to assess the degree

to which this is already taking place through this review, but the benefit of additional expertise is worthy of study.

### **Limitations**

Though only a small number of studies (16) were reviewed, this number likely reflects the relatively little research done into arts-based pedagogical approaches in social justice teaching in teacher education and not an issue with search procedures. I did, however, limit my search to articles published in English and may have excluded relevant research from non-English language journals.

### **Centering Disability in Social Justice Education**

As we consider the role of arts-based pedagogy in creating meaningful social justice learning for preservice teachers, we must remember the reality: the number of students with disabilities educated in inclusive settings is increasing, and most educators are not prepared to greet these students with anti-ableist, strengths-based attitudes and teaching approaches, not to mention a nuanced understanding of how ableism and racism operate in tandem. In our strengthening resolve to include social justice in teacher education, we cannot afford to leave disability out of the conversation. We know that arts-based pedagogy can powerfully normalize and celebrate the natural variation in how bodies and minds experience and interpret the world, but it does not always, and it never does by accident. It takes sustained, intentional effort and critical reflexivity on the part of facilitators to center and recenter disability perspectives. To realize the full potential of arts-based pedagogy for social justice learning in teacher education, this is what is required.

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## Appendix A

## Summary of Articles Included in this Review

Year	Author	Title	Collab.	Primary Art Form	Social Justice Understanding	Strengths			Weaknesses		
						Critical Reflection	Practicing Empathy	Building Community	Self-Efficacy	Deficit Perspectives	Relying Privilege
2003	Rosaen, C. L.	Preparing Teachers for Diverse Classrooms: Creating Public and Private Spaces to Explore Culture through Poetry Writing	Partial Peer	Creative Writing	Intersectional	X					X
2007	Belliveau, George	An Alternative Practicum Model for Teaching and Learning	Peer-Student	Theater & Drama	Superficial		X	X	X		
2009	Boylan, Mark	Engaging with issues of emotionality in mathematics teacher education for social justice	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Intersectional	X	X				
2009	Fierros, E. G.	Using performance ethnography to confront issues of privilege, race, and institutional racism: An account of an arts-based teacher education project	Peer	Theater & Drama	Intersectional			X			
2011	Brigham, Susan M.	Braided Stories and Bricolaged Symbols: Critical Reflection and Transformative Learning Theory for Teachers	Partial Peer	Multiple Forms	Narrowly-Focused or Non-Specific	X		X			
2011	Harman, R., & McClure, G.	All the school's a stage: Critical performative pedagogy in urban teacher education.	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Intersectional			X		X	X
2011	Kraehe, Amelia M.; Brown, Keffrelyn D.	Awakening Teachers' Capacities for Social Justice With/In Arts-Based Inquiries	Partial Peer	Multiple Forms	Intersectional	X	X			X	
2012	McDermott, Moma; Shelton, Nancy Rankie; Mogge, Stephen G.	Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Immigrants and Possibilities of Transformative Pedagogy: Recommendations for a Praxis of "Critical Aesthetics"	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Intersectional	X	X			X	
2013	Branscombe, Margaret; Schneider, Jenifer Jasinski.	Embodied Discourse: Using Tableau to Explore Preservice Teachers' Reflections and Activist Stances.	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Narrowly-Focused or Non-Specific	X	X				
2014	Wooten, Jennifer; Cahnmann-Taylor, Melisa	Black, White, and Rainbow [of Desire]: the colour of race-talk of pre-service world language educators in Boalian theatre workshops	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Intersectional	X					
2016	Powers, B., & Duffy, P. B.	Making invisible intersectionality visible through theater of the oppressed in teacher education.	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Intersectional	X		X		X	X
2017	Bhukhanwala et al	Beyond the student teaching seminar: examining transformative learning through arts-based approaches	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Narrowly-Focused or Non-Specific	X	X	X	X		
2017	Desai, Shiv R..	Utilizing Theatre of the Oppressed Within Teacher Education to Create Emancipatory Teachers.	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Intersectional	X					
2019	Miller, Erin T.; Murray, Beth; Salas, Spencer	Applied Theater and Mixed-Status Families: A Collaborative Self-Study with Teacher Education Candidates	Peer	Theater & Drama (TO)	Intersectional	X	X	X			
2019	Mohan, Annette; Jepkemboi, Grace	Engaging Education Majors to Embrace Diversity Through Expressive Arts	Peer	Multiple Forms	Superficial		X	X	X		
2019	Park, Sungok Reina; Lee, Guang-Lea; Hoot, James L.	Developing preservice teachers' sensitivity and confidence: a service-learning experience at a homeless shelter	Peer-Student	Multiple Forms	Superficial		X		X		