

Florida Association of Teacher Educators Journal Volume 1 Number 14
2014 1-16. <http://www.fate1.org/journals/2014/jacobs.pdf>

Fostering Equitable School Contexts: Bringing a Social Justice Lens to Field Supervision

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Given the inequities present within schools today and NCATE's (2010) Blue Ribbon report, this article strongly advocates for using clinical experiences to help support the development of teacher candidates who are culturally responsive, equity-minded and committed to creating a more socially just education system. Specifically, this article provides a model for how a social justice lens can be brought to the process of field supervision. In addition vignettes are provided to illustrate how clinical experiences can become potential tools to foster teacher professional learning in creating just and equitable school contexts.

Introduction

Throughout the nation, school districts are responding to changing demographics including increasing numbers of students of color, English language learners, and students from low-income households. A variety of internal deficits such as lack of motivation, caring, or intelligence are often named as the reason for achievement disparities, rather than looking at how factors related to curriculum, pedagogy, relationships with students, and classroom environment influence achievement. Systemic issues such as inequities in resources (Kozol, 1991) and teacher quality in schools serving students of color and students from low-income households also are contributing factors to inequities in achievement (Flores, 2007; Haycock, 2001).

Many of these student groups have experienced achievement disparities in relationship to their White counterparts. While schools become more diverse, the teaching population remains overwhelming White, female, and English-only (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). This often results in a cultural mismatch between teachers and students (Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers may not understand the meaning of culture and how their own backgrounds affect their thinking and attitudes toward culturally and linguistically diverse students (Gay, 2010).

Many teacher educators have responded to these changing demographics and inequities in the school system with calls to increase teacher's capacity to teach students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse as well as low income households (Howard & Aleman, 2008; McDonald, 2007). According to McDonald (2007):

Social justice teacher education programs view preparing teachers with the knowledge, dispositions, and practices to work with students from diverse backgrounds as a fundamental responsibility of teacher education and require that the multiple settings of programs—university courses and field placements—contribute to prospective teachers' learning to teach from a social justice perspective. (p. 2048)

Unfortunately, in many teacher education programs, discussions of diversity and equity are still relegated to one or two courses. There is a need to develop coherent, connected programs where concepts of social justice are integrated throughout (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009; Howard & Aleman, 2008).

Recently, NCATE (2010) published the *Blue Ribbon Report on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning* which has called for teacher education to “move to programs that are fully grounded in clinical practice and interwoven with academic content and professional courses” (p. ii). Teacher candidates need to be involved in various opportunities to work within the field to link theory to practice throughout a program, not simply at the end. The report explains that the “portion of preparation that is practiced and demonstrated in real schools with real students helps ensure that candidates will be ready for the students with whom they will work and the schools in which they will teach” (p. 27).

Given the inequities that are present within schools today and NCATE's (2010) Blue Ribbon report, this article strongly advocates for using clinical experiences to help support the development of teacher candidates who are culturally responsive, equity-minded and committed to creating a more socially just education system. Specifically, this article argues that when a social justice lens is brought to the process of field supervision, clinical experiences can become potential tools to foster teacher professional learning in creating just and equitable school contexts.

Teacher Education and Social Justice

In thinking about preparing teacher candidates for social justice, Grossman, McDonald, Hammerness, and Ronfeldt (2008) explain that teachers need to develop both conceptual and practical tools. Conceptual tools include frameworks and theories of learning (i.e. constructivism) as well as philosophical views (i.e. purposes of schooling) that guide teachers' decisions about teaching and learning. Practical tools are actual practices and strategies teachers can use with students. Scholars have described frameworks or the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are needed to teach for social justice in diverse classrooms (e.g. Gay, 2010; Howard & Aleman, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Teacher candidates must possess both subject matter knowledge as well as pedagogical content knowledge in order to provide students equitable access to curriculum (Howard & Aleman, 2008). While these pieces are important, additional elements are needed to be successful working with students from diverse backgrounds. This includes developing a culturally responsive pedagogy where teachers see the intersections between a student's culture and learning. Gay (2010) defined culturally responsive pedagogy as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). Teachers must also develop sociocultural consciousness where they understand how issues connected to race, class, gender, culture, language, etc. may impact students in the classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Developing a pedagogy that is responsive to the diverse backgrounds and needs of students must be a process where teachers not only reflect on their practice, but also become sociocultural conscious about how their own identity and experiences influence their teaching (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Field Supervision and Social Justice

There are few research studies relating field supervision to culture or inequities in schools (Jacobs, 2006, 2011; Page, 2003). The concept of culture has been highlighted in the supervision literature using terms such as multicultural (Davidman, 1990; Grant & Zozakiewicz, 1995) and culturally responsive (Bowers & Flinders, 1991; Gay, 1998). However, this literature is scarce and found primarily in the 1990s. Bowers and Flinders (1991) explained that culturally responsive supervision "...provides teachers with a third-party vantage point that may help them recognize how language and cultural patterns that

they take for granted (and thus are not aware of) influence the learning environment of the classroom” (p.7).

Within recent years, the educational leadership literature has emphasized the concept of leadership for social justice. This literature suggests that we need leaders who have the ability to transform schools into equitable contexts that are focused on social justice and meeting the needs of all students (Brown, 2006; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2008). Leaders for social justice work to identify and critique patterns of injustice (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Marshall, 2004), identify systems and structures that lead to inequities, promote inclusive practices and equitable access to curriculum and pedagogy (McKenzie et al., 2008; Shields, 2004), and support teacher professional development in socially just practices (Kose, 2007; Theoharis, 2007).

While the importance and need for field supervision is sometimes implied, it is rarely discussed in the teacher education for social justice literature. For example, Sleeter (2008) shared that within field-based experiences, “our prospective teachers rely on what they’ve learned about the urban context through families, communities, churches, and media to frame their observations” (p. 122) and this can often result in deficit views and misinterpretation of what they see. For example, a student may be “misbehaving” in class, however, this may be occurring because a “specific school or classroom, may not support the students’ cultures, identities, and intellectual capabilities” (p. 569). Teacher candidates need support to help examine these situations before they develop negative attitudes about students. Sleeter argues that field-based learning needs to prompt teachers to engage in critical reflection and begin to question what they see. However, the literature is often scarce in discussions of how supervision might support this questioning and influence teachers ability to successful teach diverse students.

Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions of Supervisors for Social Justice

Theoharis (2007) explains that leaders for social justice “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). Based on Theoharis’s definition, I define supervision for social justice as a process focused on the professional growth of teachers with the end goal of creating more equitable educational environments for all students. Issues of equity connected to culture, race, social class, gender, language, ability, and sexual orientation become central to the supervisor’s platform and practice of supervision.

While the teacher education for social justice literature discusses the conceptual and practical tools that are needed to develop teachers for social justice, what does this mean for supervisors who promote equity and social justice? The following are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that characterize supervisors for social justice.

Engaging in Critical Self-reflection

Supervisors with a social justice lens must begin their supervision practice with a focus on self. Engaging in critical self-reflection is important as supervisors begin to understand their own biases as well as their experiences with race, social class, gender, language, ability, and sexual orientation (Brown, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Since a majority of teachers, principals, and teacher education faculty members are White, they must explore their own White racial identity as well as their privileges in society (McIntosh, 1990). Grant and Zozakiewicz (1995) explained that multicultural supervisors must be willing to engage in their own professional development and self-reflection related to enacting supervision focused on equity and diversity.

Facilitating Critical Reflection

Supervisors for social justice must be skilled in the art of coaching and facilitating dialogue that promotes critical reflection (Jacobs, 2006). Critical reflection involves thinking about the effects of one's actions on others and taking the broader socio-cultural, historical, and political context into account (Hatton & Smith, 1995). This involves deep questioning and making one's thinking problematic. A goal of supervisors for social justice is to facilitate teachers' critical reflection to uncover their underlying beliefs, question their assumptions, and begin to reframe these assumptions (Guerra & Nelson, 2010; Hatton & Smith, 1995). Within supervisory conversations, supervisors prompt teachers to critically reflect on their pedagogy, curriculum, classroom environment, relationship with students, assessment practices, etc. Supervisors are always asking questions such as: Who has access? Whose voice is being left out? What assumptions are being made? What else could be going on here? as they engage in critically reflective dialogue with teachers.

Knowledge of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Supervisors must have an in-depth understanding of culture and culturally responsive pedagogy in order to help support teacher growth in this area (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Bowers and Flinders (1991) explained that supervisors need to understand and observe for language and cultural patterns representing historical and cross-cultural perspectives, metaphorical language, cultural stereotypes, nonverbal communication, participation patterns, and gender bias. They explained that culturally responsive supervision does not eliminate many of the traditional concerns of supervisors such as classroom management, lesson sequence, etc. but places them in a broader context of culture and language. Teachers must go beyond simply incorporating celebrations, foods, and traditional clothing into the curriculum, but to the deeper definition of culture and the inner-workings of students' daily lives (Gonzalez, et al.,

2005). This includes building positive relationships with students and families as well as valuing students' culture within pedagogy and curriculum (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Knowledge of Individual and Structural Equity Issues

Within supervision for social justice there is a connection to justice and equity on multiple levels. Chubbuck (2010) argues that there must be a combination of both an "individually oriented lens" and a "structurally oriented lens" when analyzing the reasons for and answers to inequities for children in schools. Supervisors must use their social justice lens to help support teachers in meeting individual student needs and creating equity within their classroom. However, supervisors must help teacher grow in understanding how students' "opportunities to learn" (McDonald, 2008, p.154) can be influenced by students' memberships in specific social or cultural groups as well as other identifications such as special education or English language learner. A teacher needs to know about the individual needs and interests of a student in her classroom, however, knowing this student as African American assists her in understanding how structural inequities and racism might influence this student's experiences in school as well.

Supervisors for social justice must also facilitate teacher learning in connection to how structures and policies within schools and the larger society can influence the promotion of inequities for students. For example, they must help teachers analyze whether certain student groups are continually segregated through inequitable structures and practices such as tracking (Theoharis, 2007). This is when conversations within the supervision context may move to how to challenge and possibly transform these policies and structures to create greater educational equity.

Challenging Deficit Thinking

Supervisors who bring a social justice lens also work to challenge deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997). Deficit thinking occurs when educators lay the blame for educational gaps on "the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom" (Weiner, 2006, p. 42). Teachers will often say a child is not motivated or their parents do not care about education instead of looking at curriculum, teaching practices, relationships, or the systemic issues. Therefore, a key characteristic for supervisors is the ability to help teachers deconstruct and reframe their deficit beliefs (Guerra & Nelson, 2010). Supervisors must also help teachers begin to view the assets students, families, and communities possess (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

Acting as a Change Agent

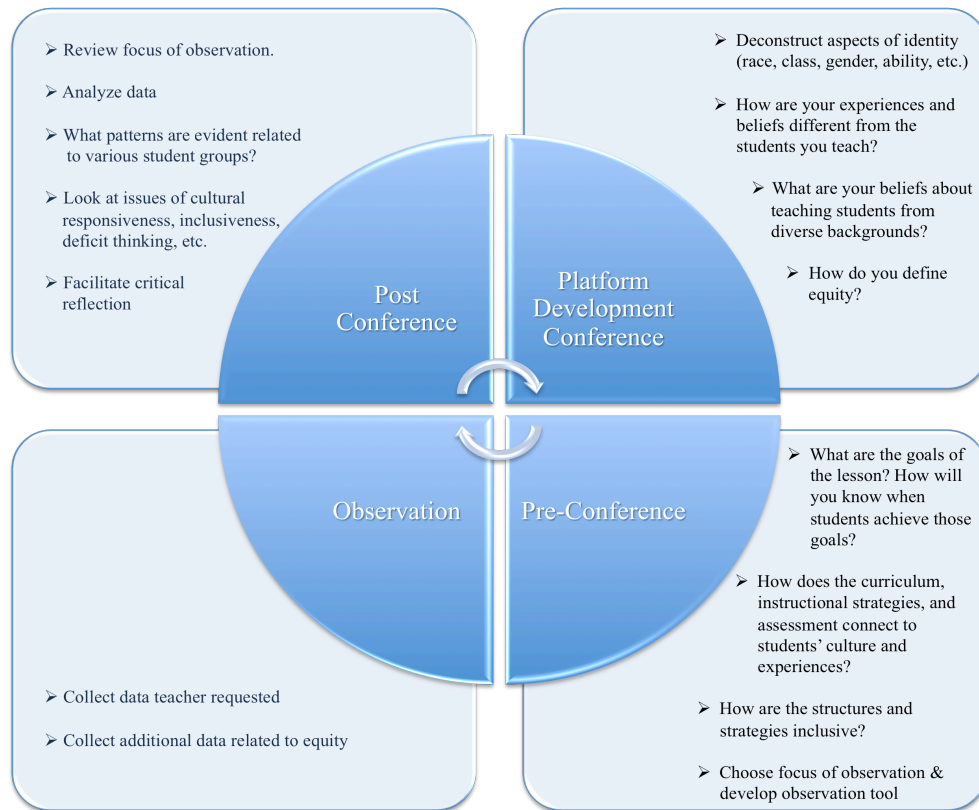
Finally, supervisors must be activists against injustice. In other words, change agents. Supervisors for social justice are not neutral in their positioning as they actively work through the process of supervision to create more equitable schools. The work of supervisors for social justice is not easy and requires a great deal of courage. They are often in the position of having to ask tough questions. This may result in resistance and pushback from other stakeholders who may feel threatened by possible change (Theoharis, 2007). With this courage, supervisors can become activists against injustice.

A Social Justice Lens within the Cycle of Supervision

Within field experiences, supervision is often closely connected to clinical supervision or a process for professional development and teacher growth (Cogan, 1973; Goldhammer, 1969; Nolan & Hoover, 2004). Traditionally, the cycle of clinical supervision begins with a *platform development conference* where the supervisor prompts the teacher candidate to verbalize and reflect on her beliefs about teaching. The *pre-conference* takes place prior to a teaching observation where the teacher can share her goals and sequence for the lesson. At the pre-conference the teacher chooses a focus for the supervisor's observation and a method for data collection is agreed upon. Within the *observation*, the supervisor collects the data the teacher candidate has requested. After the observation, the supervisor and teacher meet for a *post-conference* where they analyze the data collected and usually set goals for the next supervision cycle.

When supervisors bring a social justice lens to their supervision pedagogy they include prompts to help teachers recognize inequities related to individual students and their teaching practices, as well as move toward understanding structural inequities in schools (Chubbuck, 2010). Guiding the entire supervision cycle is the supervisor's social justice lens (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Cycle of field supervision with a social justice lens.*



Beginning in the *platform development conference*, the supervisor asks questions related not only to beliefs about teaching, but provides opportunities for the teacher to critically self-reflect about her experiences with diversity related to race, social class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. Deconstructing one's identity takes time and over several cycles the supervisor may facilitate this reflection through questioning, but also by helping the teacher develop an auto-ethnography or life history examining each of the different facets of diversity. The supervisor also prompts the teacher candidate to think about the possible mismatches with her students, using questions such as: How are your experiences and beliefs different from the students you teach? What are your beliefs about teaching students from diverse backgrounds? Where did these beliefs originate? How do you define equity?

During the *pre-conference*, an equity focus is added to the questions a supervisor asks about the lesson she will observe. The supervisor may ask questions such as, How are you connecting to student culture and experiences? How are the structures to be used during the lesson inclusive? How do the instructional strategies promote a variety of learning and communication styles? How does the curriculum promote multiple perspectives? During the pre-conference, these equity-focused questions may lead to wonderings that may influence the focus a teacher chooses for the observation. Even though the teacher still chooses a focus for the observation, supervision for social justice differs from traditional clinical supervision because the supervisor may help the teacher identify concerns along dimensions of equity. For example, if a teacher is struggling with student achievement in mathematics in a school where African American students are

struggling with mathematics, the focus of the observation and the dialogue related to mathematics instruction cannot just focus on best practices in math, but must also include discussions of race and culture. Therefore, the tool developed for observation would also need to be conducive to highlighting these issues of equity. For example, the observation tool must help the supervisor keep track of trends related to racial groups and gender.

Since the supervisor brings a social justice lens to this process, during the *observation*, the supervisor not only collects the data the teacher candidate has requested but looks for issues of equity to bring up during the post-conference. These issues might connect to inclusiveness, deficit thinking, cultural responsiveness, etc.

Finally, during the *post-conference*, the supervisor presents the data collected during the observation, and facilitates discussion to highlight patterns of inequity as well as ideas for moving toward more socially just practices. The supervisor does not bring up issues of social justice in isolation, but can relate these issues the teacher's concerns as evidenced in the focus of the observation. For example, in discussing student engagement, connections can be made to relationships, curriculum, and culturally relevant instruction.

Illustrations of Supervision with a Social Justice Lens

The following snapshots illustrate how supervisors who bring a social justice lens enact their pedagogy. These illustrations are written as vignettes, but are based on data from a research study of six preservice teacher field supervisors participating in professional development related to bringing a social justice lens to supervision (see Jacobs & Yendol-Hoppey, 2010). During this professional development opportunity, supervisors came together for eight two-hour sessions over a fall semester. The first four sessions focused on building knowledge related to equity and supervision, with topics such as identity, levels of reflection, deficit thinking, and supervision philosophy and strategies. The supervisors then learned about embedding social justice into their practice and engaged in two supervision cycles with a teacher candidate. The sessions were transcribed and participants kept reflective journals as sources of data. These specific examples were chosen to illustrate how supervisors enact some of the characteristics described above.

Illustration One: Fostering Culturally Responsive Classroom Management

Ann, a field supervisor, discussed an observation and post-conference with a teacher candidate, Sarah. This novice teacher was struggling with classroom management and asked Ann to focus on her responses to student behavior within an observation. Ann kept track of the specific behaviors Sarah reprimanded students for as well the specific

students that Sarah was addressing for misbehavior. Sarah became very frustrated during the lesson and had certain students move their desks to the outer perimeter of the room.

During the post-conference, Ann shared the data collected during the observation. The diagram showed the students on the outer perimeter as well as key words next to their names related to the misbehavior such as “calling out”, “talking to neighbor”, “talking back”, etc. Ann asked Sarah to look over the data for any patterns. Sarah first explained how all the students on the perimeter were boys. Ann pushed Sarah to look more closely at the students beyond gender to race. Sarah was able to see that all students on the perimeter were African American. Ann also prompted Sarah to look for patterns in the type of misbehaviors the students were exhibiting. Sarah was quick to say that these all of these students were disrespectful.

Ann prompted Sarah to become critically self-reflective about her own beliefs related to respect and possible cultural mismatches with her students. Ann asked, “How do you define respect? Why do you think all of the students happened to be African American who exhibited this concept of disrespect?” She began to ask Sarah how her past experiences influenced her definition of disrespect. Sarah talked about her own parents and the values they instilled. “They made sure I knew how to act with adults and to learn proper manners. I do not know what it is with these kids, I think their parents do not bother to teach these lessons!” Ann then probed further by asking, “Why is it that most of the White students seem to align with this definition of respect?” She also talked to Sarah about the type of relationship she had with the students who had misbehaved. The next time Ann and Sarah met they looked at an article related to cultural mismatches (Irvine, 2003; Monroe, 2005) and patterns of African American student interaction in the classroom. Ann began to work with Sarah on becoming more culturally responsive in her classroom management style.

Illustration Two: Fostering Inclusive Practices & Equitable Structures

Joe observed several math groups rotate through Paige’s sixth grade classroom. Paige asked Joe to specifically observe student engagement in the different groups. During the post-conference, Joe shared his data with Paige as they began to uncover trends within the lessons in relation to engagement. While all the lessons were centered on division, Joe shared the instructional practices he observed. The most “advanced” group engaged in a simulation task. The second group completed a division worksheet and then played a division game. The group labeled “lowest”, began with Paige reading the math textbook and ended with a practice worksheet. Joe questioned Paige about her rationale for choosing these varied instructional practices. He also asked Paige to rate each group according to Bloom’s taxonomy. After noticing patterns, Joe asked, “Why did the group labeled more advanced have the opportunity to engage in an application situation? Why did the “lowest” group spend the entire class completing a worksheet?”

Paige responded, “The lowest group just cannot handle themselves during a simulation activity, they get too wild, and they need to master the basics first.”

Joe and Paige then looked at the patterns of off-task behavior and saw that the lowest group in fact was the most off-task group. They began to talk about engagement in relation to the types of activities planned. Joe prompted Paige to begin thinking about access to engaging pedagogy across all students. He wanted Paige to begin thinking about how tracking practices within mathematics could foster inequities for students. Before the next observation they disaggregated all of the students by race, language proficiency, and gender to see if there were any patterns in the tracking practices. There were definite trends with an overrepresentation of Latino students and English language learners in the “lowest” group. How could this be seen as segregation? Joe and Paige began to brainstorm how she could begin to make changes. They discussed possible levels of change ranging from keeping the tracking but changing pedagogy, to the possibility of creating more heterogeneous grouping opportunities.

Illustration Three: Fostering Assets-Based Thinking

Colin described his experience in a post-conference with a White third grade teacher candidate, Abigail, who taught in a predominantly Latino school. Colin had observed a science lesson related to the water cycle. The post-conference conversation began to focus on the difficulties Abigail experienced when a majority of the students had not completed their homework. Abigail began by saying, “These students do not care about school. This happens all the time. Their parents do not even check that their homework is complete. If parents don’t care, then how can I expect the students to care?”

After listening, Colin began to ask Abigail questions to reframe the deficit thinking she exhibited. First, he wanted Abigail to reflect on the assets students brought to the classroom. “What do the students in your class do really well?” Then he wanted her to begin thinking about how her practices might be influencing homework completion rather than blaming students and families. “Besides not caring, what might be some other reasons students are not completing their homework? What have you done within the classroom to support students in completing their homework? How have you communicated with parents about homework?” Colin and Abigail also begin to discuss language and how parents may have difficulty with helping students at home. “What strategies do students have if the homework is too difficult? Do students understand the concepts well enough after the lesson to be able to complete independent work?” More importantly, Colin asked Abigail about her relationships with parents. “How do you foster communication and relationships with parents? What are the assets the parents in your classroom hold? How might you begin to bring some of those positive assets into the classroom?” The next time Colin and Abigail met, he brought an article about culture and how Latino families might have different ways of expressing parent involvement and caring about school. Colin wanted Abigail to begin understanding different definitions of parental involvement rather than the White middle class image she possesses.

Discussion

A lack of explicit focus on social justice and issues related to race, social class, culture, gender, language, ability, and sexual orientation in supervision pedagogy serves to maintain the status quo within schools. In order to begin developing more equitable school contexts where we move toward eliminating achievement gaps, field supervisors within teacher education must begin working for social justice. However, enacting supervision with a social justice lens is not without challenges. These challenges may include supervisor and teacher readiness as well as the formation of relationships.

While some supervisors may have a social justice orientation, many supervisors must intentionally develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to supporting teachers about social justice. This work is often challenging and takes a great deal of commitment on the part of supervisors. They may need time to engage in professional development to develop a social justice lens toward teaching and supervision. Also, based on their beliefs, not all supervisors may “buy” into the idea of social justice.

Theoharis (2007) discussed the resistance that leaders for social justice may face and the huge toll this work takes on them personally. Supervisors may face greater resistance to ideas that are in opposition to teacher beliefs as they move the conversation beyond best practices to such issues as race and deficit thinking. Gay (1998) described the level of commitment that is needed by supervisors:

If supervisors are not personally and professionally committed to promoting gender and ethnic equity within the domain of supervision, getting teachers to do so in the classroom will be impossible because supervisors, like teachers with students, cannot lead, direct, guide, or facilitate in terrains they themselves do not know, value, or do. (p. 1218)

Having professional development opportunities where field supervisors can come together as a learning community to discuss the challenges they face engaging in supervision for social justice may help to support and sustain their work (Jacobs & Yendol-Hoppey, 2010).

Asking teachers to focus on issues of equity and moving toward being more socially just is a very complicated task. Supervisors may face resistance from teachers and, therefore, they must be cognizant of teacher readiness and differentiate based on teachers' needs. Supervisors must use scaffolding as they pose questions and push the teacher slowly and in a safe environment. For some teachers who have not yet thought about social justice, the supervisor may spend a great deal of time in the platform development conference to prompt critical self-reflection. Focusing on their immediate classroom needs rather than the larger social political context is a way to support critical reflection for teachers who are new to social justice (Abt-Perkins et al., 2000). In other words, supervisors may begin where a teacher believes they need help and move forward from there. Sometimes teacher educators argue that teacher candidates are too preoccupied with learning to teach and areas such as classroom management to focus on

social justice. However, perhaps these traditional tasks of learning to teach are actually very connected to issues of equity.

While relationship building has always been a key piece of supervision, when thinking about engaging in supervision for social justice, the need for relationships is even more prominent. Relationships are essential at various levels. Field supervisors need to build trusting relationships with teacher candidates in order to engage in sensitive conversations about equity. The supervision context needs to be a place where teachers feel safe to share and question their beliefs as well as where supervisors can probe with questions. Teacher candidates need to have relationships with students in the classroom so they really understand their culture, their needs, and the assets they bring to the classroom. This is especially critical for White teachers who may struggle forming relationships with families of color. Finally, field supervisors must form relationships with the students in the classroom. In order to question the teacher as well as understand possible inequities in the classroom, knowing the students is important. Connecting back to NCATE's (2010) *Blue Ribbon Report on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning*, partnerships between schools and universities that build strong relationships over time may be a natural way to promote and support supervision with a social justice lens.

As we continue to see classrooms across our nation become more diverse and the inequities for students continue grow, we must take action. Supervision has the potential to become an integral part of this change. Supporting the professional growth of teacher candidates can influence the future success of our students. By enacting field supervision with a lens of social justice, we can move closer to the goal of greater equity for students within our school system.

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