# ecsj

# Considering social justice: Lived experiences of education students during the first course year

**Sian E Jones** [iD]**, Sandra Eady
and Linda Craig**
Queen Margaret University, UK

## Abstract

Increasing research focus is placed on how to embed social justice within Education degrees. This paper reports findings from the first two phases of a cohort study completed just before and at the start of the pandemic, which track Scottish Education students' reflections on social justice at one university. We used three focus groups ($n = 14$) and surveys to analyse students' ($n = 45$) definitions of social justice. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System's Theory and Saldana's Analytical Coding framework we found that themes around prejudice, culture, policy and emerging professional identity captured participants' reflections as both beginning teachers and students of educational studies. Key to our findings was that fewer reflections of social justice were cited to global than to local contexts. This paper highlights ways in which university educators may conceive of social justice such that it is considered by students in both their immediate and in global contexts.

## Keywords

education, initial teacher education, lived experience, Scottish policy, social justice

Educating students to be able to interrupt inequities in educational settings and the community in order to enact social justice is a complex matter. For example, debates about what teacher candidates should be taught about social justice as part of their university education is a contentious theme in the teacher education literatures (Dyches and Boyd, 2017; Schiera, 2021). In this paper we argue that Education students' (including student teachers'[1]) understandings of social justice also develop through their everyday multiple interactions and experiences both on the University Campus and in community and school placement settings. Furthermore, Education students' understandings, and identification of, social justice issues are also influenced by their level of engagement in social activism and their awareness of how they might enact the policies and

**Corresponding author:**
Sian E Jones, Division of Psychology, Sociology, and Education, Queen Margaret University Edinburgh, Queen Margaret Drive, Musselburgh EH21 6UU, UK.
Email: sjones@qmu.ac.uk

legislation which shapes their personal and professional values (e.g. MacIntosh et al., 2020). Educational researchers seeking to understand such complex social phenomena need to consider how reflection on social justice helps to shape emerging professional identity as well as practice (Mertens, 2013). When viewed as a complex system, educational phenomena invite theorising by employing analysis at multiple levels of conception. For this reason, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) Ecological Systems Theory, allowing different levels of analysis, is a useful tool for enabling programme evaluations (Kallemeyn et al., 2020). Taking the above into account, this paper seeks to explore the following questions: (1) What are Education students' lived experiences of social justice as they undertake the first year of the new education programmes? (2) How might this influence their developing identity as future educators and teachers?

## Conceptualising social justice

Coming up with a definition of *social justice* is problematic and complex and depends on political ideology or the context in which it is applied (Smith, 2018). As a case in point, in a study of teacher-educators in New Zealand, Sandretto et al. (2007: 307) liken the pinning down of a definition to 'nailing jello to the wall'. Smith illustrates this complexity using the three principles suggested by Ruitenberg and Vokey (2010) to explore how we decide what is fair as one means of conceptualising social justice. First, she considers *'justice as harmony'* where people have different talents which when put together strengthen the community as well as society. Education should support and develop such talents so that everyone can reach their (different) potentials. Next Smith (2018) highlights *'justice as equity'*, where the key aim is to reduce inequalities. For example, not all pupils are the same so the teacher should treat pupils differently in order that opportunities for success become more equal. Finally, Smith (2018) highlights '*justice as equality'* where people are not the same but are equally deserving. Smith suggests that although schools and therefore teachers/educators are key agents of social justice she reminds us that remedying society's injustices is not simply the responsibility of teachers and other educators but extends beyond the school gates (Smith, 2018: 21).

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) and Pantić and Florian (2015) argue that teachers can contribute to a social justice agenda by working in ways that help to mitigate the external causes of educational inequality. They suggest this can be achieved by 'extending what is ordinarily available as opposed to doing something additional or different' (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011: 815). This requires a shift in thinking away from commonly accepted ways of providing for everyone by differentiating for some. It is distinctive in that it accepts the notion of individual differences between learners without relying predominately on individualised approaches for responding to such differences (Pantić and Florian, 2015). However, multiple interpretations of terms such as 'educational inequality', 'social justice' and 'change agency' means that there are different approaches to thinking about such ways of working and how these might be developed, for example, through initial teacher education.

Nonetheless, a keen focus on social justice remains at the heart of education degrees. In this vein, Cochran-Smith (2004) argues that we need to keep social justice issues at the forefront and centre of our considerations and not define successful outcomes of teacher education just in terms of competencies and the number of pupils achieving high grades in subject assessments. She argues that we should recognise that competent teaching and learning is much more complex and goes far beyond this and should include '*a place for critique in the face of consensus'.* In other words, Cochran-Smith (2004) argues that teacher education programmes (and we would argue all education programmes) should provide space where Education students can reflect on their own experiences and challenge assumptions especially '*questions related to diversity, equity, access and*

*racism'* as well as professional issues (p. 208). For example, she argues that *teachers, teacher educators, researchers and policy makers committed to a democratic vision of society and to the vital role that teachers and teacher educators play in that vision* should take control of framing the outcomes of teacher education', (Cochran-Smith, 2004: 208). Examining Education students' emerging understandings of social justice in educational settings was one aim of the current study.

Research in this area has already looked at probationary teachers' understandings of social justice. In New York, Sonu et al. (2012) report a case study of three new primary school teachers. They found that responsibility to teach for social justice often fell to those who were perceived to have had personal experiences with injustice. In a qualitative study in Canada, Philpott and Dagenais (2012) examined, using semi-structured interviews, 27 new teachers' reflections on practice of social justice in the classroom. They found that, on the ground, the practicalities of delivering teaching, within curriculum constraints and varying professional support meant that new teachers were able to enact their beliefs where the context in which they were teaching permitted them to do so. To our knowledge, in depth exploration of Education students' beliefs around social justice and how these emerge and develop as they become teachers has yet to be researched in the Scottish context and it is this gap which is the primary focus of this paper.

## The Scottish context

There is an ever-growing need to prepare Education students, including student teachers, to become socially aware, reflective and skilled professionals capable of promoting positive role models in educational settings where everyone is treated with respect and individual differences are valued. In Scotland, like other 'developed' countries, there is a strong correlation between children's educational outcomes and their social context (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021) and therefore for professional educators to develop a sound understanding of the key manifestations of social (in)justice at all levels in society. It is not surprising then that in Scotland, social justice concerns have been a key ingredient of educational policy (Riddell, 2009; Riddell and Weedon, 2017). The Scottish Government's National Improvement Framework (NIF) and Improvement Plan (Scottish Government, 2019) align with the three supporting pillars of Scottish Education namely the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) the national approach in Scotland to improving outcomes and supporting the wellbeing of our children and young people, which also has wellbeing at its core, and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW). The NIF sets out the vision and priorities for Scottish education agreed across the system, and the national improvement activity that needs to be undertaken to help deliver those key priorities. It highlights the importance of ensuring that every child achieves the highest standards in literacy and numeracy and that 'every child has the same opportunity to succeed' (Scottish Government, 2019). This integrated approach positions children at the centre, emphasising parental involvement and interagency working to identify children at risk and support children and young people dealing with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Davidson and Wright, 2020). Furthermore, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated poverty for many families. The British Psychological Society (2020) highlights that child poverty in the UK has increased by 2.8% in the last 4 years and is predicted to increase to 5.2 million children by 2022. In sum, in Scotland, recent consultation and position papers, reports and policies serve to underline the importance of providing a broad-based education studies programme inviting Education students to consider wider conceptions of what it means to be educated regardless of race, class and gender and including social, political and economic factors affecting diversity, poverty and social mobility. At the same time, it is also important that Education students explore issues in terms of race class and gender and how they inform an understanding of social justice, in terms of equity

and equality right from the start of their programme (General Teaching Council Scotland [GTCS], 2021a). In particular, the GTCS' (2021a) definition of social justice in relation to professional values is 'that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights'. It is therefore important that education students explore their understandings of equity and equality as 'professional values' (GTCS, 2021a); whilst student teachers are required to demonstrate their 'enactment' of personal and professional values in the form of 'professional actions'. Teacher agency is required to be demonstrated in the classroom context (GTCS, 2021b) in order for student teachers to demonstrate competence against the GTCS Standard for Provisional Registration GTCS, 2021b).

However, Scotland like the rest of the UK struggles to attract a diverse range of students to university and particularly to teacher education courses (Education Policy Institute, 2020; Scottish Government, 2018; UK Government, 2021). Despite an emphasis on attracting students through widening participation programmes to Higher Education such as the Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS) and the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), cohorts of students remain predominantly white female and from middle class sectors of society. Thus, it could be argued that there is a greater need to challenge pre-existing values and assumptions and to experience or have heightened awareness of social (in)justices in society at all levels in order to learn how these can negatively influence or impact on life chances for children and young adults from different social classes, ethnic groups or gender.

## Theoretical context

As highlighted above, given the complexity of social justice as a phenomenon, we wanted to explore its complexity in our students' understandings. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) ecological Systems Model allowed us to explore the multiple levels at which Education students could explore the concept of social justice. Indeed, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) developed the ecological systems theory precisely to illustrate the complexity of child development. The theory proposed that a child's development is affected by the surrounding environment at different levels including immediate settings such as the family and school as well as broader cultural values, policies and customs. Bronfenbrenner suggests we can only really understand child development if we study the interaction between a child's immediate and wider environment. To help us do this Bronfenbrenner identified five different systems at play within a child's environment, the microsystem (most immediate environmental setting) the mesosystem (comprising interactions between different immediate environments) the exo-system (other formal and informal social structures such as a parent's workplace, the mass media, the neighbourhood) the macro system (the established society and culture in which the child lives) and the chronosystem (life transitions and historical events).

Adapting Bronfenbrenner's model, to explore Education students' lived experiences of social justice suggests the importance of considering how social justice, in terms of our Education students' experiences, is manifested and interlinked across all levels through activities, routines and practices and through a language mediated meaning making system. More specifically, we are interested in Education students' lived experiences of social justice during their first year of study and how their class, gender and ethnicity might influence interpretation of their lived experiences. We are aware that we cannot study the Education students or the course in isolation but acknowledge that individual Education student views and dispositions of social justice are shaped at the micro level in terms of their class, race, and gender as well as in their previous and current interactions with each other, peers, their families, at schools, religious institutions and work. Whilst the university is another institution added into Education student interactions (microsystem); we acknowledge that the University is also part of the macro system. At the same time,

we acknowledge that within the mesosystem the connections or (dis)connections between such settings also mediate and shape dispositions towards social justice (e.g. the interconnection between the family and the school, or the family and work, or the family and peers, or peers and the university).

We also acknowledge that aspects of social justice will also be evident within the exosystem, between social settings in which Education students participate and where they don't have an active role (community-based experience, school placements, university) and their immediate context. For example, the recent pandemic affected the way university, schools and community placements could operate and although Education students were not active participants in terms of subsequent decision making and crisis planning, their views of social justice may have been indirectly affected by these wider events which resulted in the move to predominantly online learning at university and limited or no access to school and community placements.

In a similar vein, Education student beliefs and actions regarding social justice are influenced by the macrosystem, the wider social context of culture, society, community (e.g., cultural norms, societal belief systems, ideologies, government policies and laws, globalisation). These may indirectly influence Education student dispositions towards social justice. We suggest that these four levels map onto the structure and methodology of the overall cohort study research but also can be used to structure the analysis of the qualitative data from the first year of the study presented below. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2013) argue that, in this way, and using qualitative research data, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) theoretical framework allows us to explore the messiness of becoming a professional educator through the lens of social justice, increasing current knowledge, and understanding of how social justice is constructed and experienced by Education students in different environments and the consequences/implications of this for their professional practice.

## The University context

The Education Studies Programmes, in line with Scottish policy, at the University aim to take a fresh, contemporary, and ambitious approach with a commitment to widening access and engaging Education students with the concept of social justice, the wider socio-political issues that affect education on every level, and how this in turn influences educational outcomes for children and young people. It aims to be a 'transformative' approach (cf. Mezirow, 2003) to professional education where the ethos of social justice runs through the core of each programme.

The overarching aim of the Education programmes is to produce socially aware, reflective, skilled educators including teachers who can engage in inter-agency collaborations to the benefit of a child's holistic health and wellbeing experience of education within their community contexts (Forbes and Watson, 2011). The three Education programmes share a common ethos and approach, with a focus on wellbeing, resilience, child welfare and inequality. The Education programmes at the University align closely with the Scottish Curriculum and aim to embed Health and Wellbeing, Literacy (including digital and data literacy) and Numeracy across learning. A second core component of the Education Programmes is getting it right for every child (GIRFEC). Our programmes are built to embed its values and principles while ensuring these are clearly recognised by the Education students but not 'so well embedded they are invisible'. Thus, the programmes aim to model with Education students the practices, attitudes and approaches we wish them to use in their own work and avoid deficit language and assumptions of 'normality' in our exchanges, teaching, material, teaching resources, and marketing material.

A strong emphasis is placed on the understanding of the principles of social justice, wellbeing, diversity, and inclusion, including a critical view of society's barriers and enablers to learning to read and write, many of which are deeply entrenched. In the first year of the undergraduate

programmes (education studies and education studies (primary)) students take the same six, 20 credit modules. One of these modules includes a community-based education experience (CBE) of 5 days or 30 hours. The other five modules are taught on the university campus. The year long, postgraduate PGDE education programme is divided between 18 weeks of school experience spread over the year and carried out within two different schools and 18 weeks of campus-based teaching input. On this programme student teachers progressively take greater responsibility for teaching a range of secondary Home Economics classes.

### Present study

Taking account of the arguments presented above, we examined our first year Education students' conceptions of social justice in qualitative surveys at the beginning and end of the year, and via a series of focus groups. We report here a qualitative analysis of our first year Education students' understanding of social justice, across our degree programmes. We use Bronfenbrenner's framework to contrast their definitions of social justice at the beginning and end of the year, whether they can be attributed to a micro, meso-, exo- or macro-system of understanding of social justice. We consider the definitions alongside the examples of social justice in action that were given in the second survey, and in the focus groups.

## Method

### Participants

Prior to the start of teaching in August-September 2020, and again at the end of the first year in April-May 2020 Education students (PGDE in Home Economics, BA in Education Studies or BA in Education Studies: Primary) were invited to take a survey. The Education students who completed the first survey, $N = 133$ (13 male, 120 female; $n = 15$ PGDE in Home Economics, $n = 14$ BA in Education Studies or $n = 103$ BA in Education Studies: Primary; 1 student did not declare their course of study) had a mean age of 17.64 years (SD = 6.81 years). Ethnicity was measured using the categories from the Scotland Census (2011) with the option for participants to self-describe at each category point to choose the term that they felt best fitted their identity. Using these categories and self-descriptions, 101 students stated that they were white British or white Irish, 5 that they had a different white ethnicity, 20 that they had mixed Black and white ethnicity; 1 that they had Black ethnicity, and 5 that they had an Asian ethnicity. One participant did not declare their ethnicity. Data on participant class were not gathered.

   At the second phase, $N = 45$ participants returned data. Of these, 2 were male, 43 female; $n = 38$ white British, $n = 5$ different white ethnicity, $n = 1$ Asian ethnicity, $n = 1$ did not declare ethnicity. Only students who provided data at Phase 1 and Phase 2 were included in the subsequent analysis Focus group interviews with 14 students (2 male, 12 female; $n = 10$ white British, $n = 3$ different white ethnicity and 1 Asian ethnicity) were also conducted in January–February 2020. Ethical approval for each part of the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Panel at the institution.

### Measures

*Demographic information.* Participants reported on demographic characteristics, including age, sex, ethnicity and whether they were from a widening participation background (the first in their household to come to university; completed an HND/HNC course; student-parent; foster care-leaver; carer).

*Defining social justice.* Education students were asked to provide a definition of social justice at the beginning of the first year of their programme (Phase 1) and again at the end of the first year (Phase 2). In Phase 2 they were also asked to provide examples of social justice in their university classes, and as appropriate their community-based placements or school-based placements

## Procedure

*Phase 1 survey.* Phase 1 of data collection involved a survey that was distributed to Education students in their first week at the university.

*Focus groups.* All Education students were invited to take part in one of three focus groups during January-February 2020. To give fruitful discussion across the Education courses, focus groups comprised a mix of undergraduate [UG] and PGDE students. The first focus group ($n=7$) included six Education students. One of these participants was male. The second focus group ($n=5$) included one male participant. The third focus group comprised two female students. The following questions were used in the focus groups.

'Can you recall a time when social justice was mentioned in your courses?' and 'Why is it important to reflect upon social justice?'

*Phase 2 survey.* Phase 2 of the data collection took place during the first UK lockdown. It took the form of an online questionnaire hosted at Qualtrics. Recruitment took place via email announcements.

## Results

The findings here relate to the qualitative data from the Phase 1 and Phase 2 surveys and focus groups. Recognising the uniqueness of the study and the complex phenomena in the data, we applied two coding methods and two different analytical approaches to enhance concurrence accountability as well as the depth and breadth of findings (Saldaña, 2009, citing Coffey and Atkinson, 2006; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005; Mello, 2002).

### First level of analysis

The responses to the definitions and examples of social justice prior to and at the end of teaching were firstly coded using In Vivo and Values coding (Saldaña, 2009). An analysis of responses from Education students who had replied to both Phase 1 and Phase 2 questions were then compared. Initial codes were further categorised for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 data using Mindjet Mapping software.

### Second level of analysis

A second level of analysis was applied looking across the coded data to draw out emerging patterns and trends. For example, Education students' values, beliefs and attitudes seemed to be expressed at macro-, exo-, meso- and micro- levels (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994).

### Third level of analysis

A more detailed third level analysis of focus group interviews using Mindjet software enabled cross comparisons with the survey data and deeper insights into the phenomena of how the participants

were constructing their understanding of social justice. This allowed us to identify themes and sub themes.

## Findings

Within the first and second level of analysis, we could see clear differences in the definitions of social justice at the beginning and end of the teaching year. For example:

> *Giving all children equal opportunities and not discriminating against them. Allowing children to believe they are capable of great things no matter their race, sex or income*
>
> *(Survey Participant, Phase 1)*
>
> *Every child having equal opportunities regardless of their background or origin. And educating them to be active participants in the community instead of following the crowd. (Survey Participant, Phase 2)*

In the first phase definitions participants overwhelmingly focused on equality of opportunity, regardless of background. In the second phase, as illustrated above, Education students provided more detail in their definitions and focused not just on addressing inequality but on their role in educating children around issues of social justice, to perpetuate its advance.

From the analysis it was found that there was a greater reference to social justice at the micro level. Most responses were in relation to Education students' interactions with children of primary and secondary school age with little reference to other phases in the lifespan. There was a notable distinction between examples of social justice and social (in)justice with many more Education students commenting on examples of the latter. Within the survey data Education students predominantly referred to social justice in relation to others rather than in terms of themselves whereas the focus group data revealed more examples of social justice relating to Education students' personal experience. Values, attitudes, and beliefs were also expressed as either reflection on, or enactment of social justice and injustice.

The first and second level of analysis showed that many responses could be categorised under the broad themes of inclusion and equality. For example

> *[Social justice means] teaching that everybody should be treated equally and have equal opportunities no matter their background, ethnicity, religious beliefs, disabilities, gender, or sexual orientation. This should be demonstrated in educational settings (Survey Participant, Phase 2)*

The third level of analysis generated further subcategories of prejudice, culture, policy and teacher identity, evident within micro-, meso-, exo- and macro levels.

*Prejudice.* In some recollections of university teaching about social justice, Education students reflected on the nature of prejudice and identity-based discrimination.

> *During Sociology discrimination against genders and sexualities was discussed (Survey Participant, Phase 2)*
>
> *stigma in HE, resulting in gender stereotypes (Survey Participant, Phase 2)*

They also considered aspects of prejudice apparent in their Community placements:

*Girls at Rainbows who would not let a girl in their group because she did not speak very well English (Survey Participant, Phase 2)*

In the focus groups, Education students reflected that a discussion of social justice was important in their courses *because* of the nature of prejudice:

*I think it's definitely important because . . ..you know like racism like homophobia it all stems from not knowing like not having an understanding of that topic (Focus Group Participant)*

One Education student cited their reason for choosing teaching as being a means to stand in the way of prejudice in the light of her previous experiences:

*I face a lot of racism as child like I'm being discriminated because of the way I look and stuff because it's all very different racism is not nice at all and . . .I want to become a teacher to make like a change an because . . ..when I was a kid it wasn't addressed properly at all it was more just the head teachers told him to say sorry. . . so yeah I think it's really important to address (Focus Group Participant)*

There was a recognition that as prejudice is taught, so can its antithesis be:

*And these things are all taught behaviours as a practitioner if we teach the facts of people's experiences and just have empathy and listen to what's going on then we can all learn because you know ultimately like prejudice is just you know a taught behavioural feeling (Focus Group Participant)*

Education students commented on the perceived value of having conversations around prejudice:

*we don't want to bring up children in judgmental way we don't want to teach them to be judgemental so if we're open about different topics they will be less judgmental and we will make it less judgmental society (Focus Group Participant)*

and especially in light of media representations:

*think like stereotypes in the media teach prejudice as well so challenging that through conversations start point to reach their potential (Focus Group Participant)*

Education students were also mindful of the need to reflect upon their own prejudices and knowledge gaps:

*success in education which shouldn't be inhibited by teachers not knowing enough about like certain conditions or disabilities or being prejudiced about race or you know anything else they've got to be aware of all students as individuals and understand that the influence they have is . . . .. people living who are certain race, living with a disability or LGBT or whatever that's a fact and that needs to be recognised and that's not an excuse for not understanding that and not being aware of the things they go through (Focus Group Participant)*

*Culture.* References to culture were greatest in the focus groups rather than survey data, where Education students referred mostly to cultural equality/equity.

Inputs from their university course illustrate how students were beginning to conceptualise diversity and identity with regards to ethnicity and racism and connect this to an understanding of social justice.

*'Something that we need to address. . . here we have say Edinburgh community, then Scottish community, the UK community, then World community. You know it should start from the smaller communities that behaviour of being racist or somehow exclusive should be unacceptable' (Focus Group Participant)*

This reflects one Home Economics Education student teacher's critical thinking which combines their consideration of addressing social justice issues in relation to their professional role of being an HE teacher in the 21st Century – a key theme addressed by students on the HE Programme.

However, it was evident that Education student awareness of religion and ethnicity was also shaped by upbringing as well as inputs from their university programme,

*'this country is incredibly diverse now. There's no you know white catholic you know. Protestant people anymore kind of a bit of everything. And so you've just got, I just think personally you've got to be considerate of everybody that's around you. But that's the way I was brought up' (Focus Group Participant)*

Another example acknowledged how social injustice experienced by 'peers' or 'friends' was also having a greater influence on ideas around social justice as well as the university programmes. For example,

*'and because I've got a lot of friends like privately who were from different backgrounds, different culture. . . like you know Asia and things like that. They have all said you know when they started coming to school over here they had a lot of issues with people understanding. . . the differences in their heritage and.. basically saying well you've not from here so you don't get a voice..' (Focus Group Participant)*

Those Home Economics Education students who had undertaken a school placement were able to give detailed accounts of the cultural aspects of addressing social justice evident through their teaching. For example:

*'You know for cooking you've got halal meat and vegetarian options, vegan, so it's things that are practical and you have to follow it much more closely than you used to' (Focus Group Participant)*

*'we can do lessons on foods from other worlds, from Africa. . .where food comes from, where fabrics come from' (Focus Group Participant)*

Another response suggested a growing awareness of a variety of children's religious beliefs:

*'I was aware that in some of the groups -cos the school was quite standard white Scottish, middle class through and there was the odd child who was from a different background or culture or religion. So I was quite aware of that not doing the religion bit. . . so why can't you eat that again?'*

*(Focus Group Participant)*

This example illustrates how misunderstandings can occur where English as an additional language creates a misunderstanding resulting in social injustice

*'and there was one boy who had not long arrived in Scotland he could think. . .he knew the answers, but he couldn't write it down. He couldn't read the questions, he couldn't write properly and he was being dismissed as a naughty child' (Focus Group Participant)*

Education students also showed that they could influence pupil views on the cultural aspects of social justice through their teaching:

*I did an activity in a theory class where the children worked in groups and they had to brainstorm why people eat different types of food (Focus Group Participant)*

However, some Education students were also aware of possible tensions between wanting to teach pupils to have an open mind about other cultures and beliefs and concerns from parents. For example,

*'If we were doing a lesson like that you have to be aware that some of the parents could then come and complain because they don't want their child to learn about other things because they don't believe in them so therefore the child's not going to either' (Focus Group Participant)*

Education students also made more generalised comments regarding *cultural equality or cultural equity* relating to race, gender, or social status, sometimes linked to children.

*equal opportunities, no matter where you come from/your background/your ethnicity/your culture' (Survey Participant, Phase 1)*

*Removing barriers to learning so everyone has the same access'.*

*Removing barriers to learning changing/adapting the environment to suit the needs of learners(people)' (Survey Participants, Phase 2)*

*social justice is providing equity within opportunities and privilege. It is allowing children the same chances and given them reciprocal rights and responsibilities (Survey Participant, Phase 2)*

*Every child having the same opportunity to achieve the same if it means one needs more help than others (Survey Participant, Phase 2)*

There was also a perception that the underlying responsibility regarding ethnicity and racism lies at government policy level:

*'immigration. That's kind of a Government thing- they need to get a plan sorted to help education' (Focus Group Participant)*

*Policy.* The qualitive survey data suggest a minority of Education students at Phase 2 reflect at a broad and general level on policy inputs in their course at macro/meso/exo/micro levels in relation to social justice. For example,

*so we're having quite a lot of input on what the government policies are for Education Scotland (Survey Participant)*

*they came in and talked about gender neutral policies (Survey Participant)*

*'getting it right for every child', (Survey Participant)*

*'its a hard idea to define there's so many ways about it in education and it can be argumentative' (Survey Participant)*

The qualitative survey data provided only one example of *reflection* on *enactment* of policy.

*'during my CBE I worked with children who were disengaged from education particularly due to external settings such as being within the care system and the different approach needed' (Survey Participant)*

Indirect references to the effects of policy were evident in the Phase 2 data, although these were not widespread at this stage in the study and were mostly evident where Education students were either on school experience or CBE. For example,

*'when on my first placement I was in a school in a very deprived area where pupils had limited access to resources and often challenging home situations which they would bring into the classroom. . .' (Focus Group Participant)*

*'Yes in the food bank many were waiting on universal credit to come which left them nothing in the bank or food to eat' (Survey Participant)*

*'yes in a practical class, when I learnt about a pupil who doesn't have a safe homelife and is rarely provided with enough food. It was quite common for our department, to give him free fruit when in the class and I could see this was such a relief to him' (Survey Participant)*

*Professional identity.* The survey and focus group data provided evidence of Education students reflecting on their emerging identities as educators in relation to their understanding of social justice. The following quotes illustrate how Education students were beginning to assimilate experiences from university and placement to develop their professional identity and understanding of social justice.

*'As teachers we'll go out and won't have our unconscious biases'*

*'they've planted the little seed in our heads about social justice/injustice' (Focus Group Participant)*

*'information that we gather here is in addition to how we represent ourselves' (Focus Group Participant)*

There was also evidence of the Education students' developing professional confidence as an 'agentic' approach:

*'GIRFEC. We get that right, I think. So I think they're asking the questions and it's kind of up to us to get our own philosophy'*

*(Focus Group Participant)*

One focus group response acknowledged that the education modules had raised awareness of social justice in relation to race, ethnicity and language. For example,

*'Think in learning through the lifespan we have because we've been talking about obviously kids who have English as a second language that they'll be coming from a different culture a different ethnicity and things sometimes and obviously you know, you've got to them take those into consideration when you're teaching those kind of kids. . .' (Focus Group Participant)*

It was also evident that some university modules had raised their awareness of gender identity and that this was influencing their perceptions of social justice when on placement:

*We've just kind of learned about sexuality and gender identity*

*(Focus Group Participant)*

*A few of us had people in the class who have been a boy or a girl and are actually known by another name (Focus Group Participant)*

*'There was a person who was non-binary and they were speaking about a haircut and that most reactions would be "do you want a male or a female haircut" when the actual question was what gender are you? I think its personally not up to us to judge' (Focus Group Participant)*

## Discussion

The aim of the phases of the present study reported here was to examine Education students' reflections on social justice. We did this by examining how their definitions of social change differed from the beginning to the end of their first course year, and through focus groups with a smaller number of participants to explore these definitions further. Education students provided a range of definitions reflecting their personal, lived experiences from the first year. They identify many examples of social (in)justice as well as examples of social justice and many of these came from focus group interviews where students gave examples from their personal experiences. Using Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) ecological framework, it was evident that Education students were mostly reporting social in/justice at the micro (individual) level in terms of the pupils' or their own experience and sometimes at the 'exo' level where systems such as home life, school and university were influencing each other. There were examples of how social justice was being enacted whereEducation students had been on placement (school or in community-based placements; CBE). There were fewer examples of social justice being reported at the 'meso', or 'macro' level other than through reflection with reference to key words such as 'race' and 'universal credit'.

To consider themes more specifically, regarding inclusion and prejudice, it was evident that Education students had reflected on the practice of inclusion in terms of the protected characteristics, and upon their personal experiences of prejudice in their own lives as well as examples in the classroom and the value of a place on the University's Education courses for examining one's own prejudices. This dovetails with our quantitative findings (not reported in this paper), showing that there was a negative association between self-transcendence and social justice beliefs for those with a high social dominance orientation and a non-widening participation background. It is also important given the work of Abacioglu et al. (2019) who showed that for teachers who reported more positive multicultural attitudes, prejudice reduction in their classroom was positively linked with pupil engagement.

With regards to the theme of culture, there was some evidence that the university courses could be raising greater awareness of cultural issues particularly in terms of beliefs and values around ethnicity and religion in relation to social in/justice. However, there was also evidence that prior experience also shaped and influenced reflections. Education students were developing their own ideas and beliefs about culture whilst at the same time recognising that their pedagogies could influence children in a positive way with regards to developing knowledge of cultural diversity through world food lessons in the Home Economics classrooms. They were also becoming increasingly aware of the importance of developing a sympathetic understanding of children's own cultures through their conversations about practical cookery classes and the language they use with the pupils. Yet, at the same time, students were becoming aware of and mediating the tensions between different cultures. It was evident that some Education students were demonstrating how

they were building up a wider understanding of cultural diversity and its importance as they developed their identities as professional educators. This would support Vélez-Agosto et al.'s (2017) argument that aspects of culture and cultural values are constructed through language meaning making systems.

In terms of the broader policy theme, responses from some Education students demonstrate how at an early stage in their course some were becoming aware of policy causes and effects and how this influences perceptions and experiences of social justice including examples of poverty, deprivation, and neglect. For example, a possible awareness of the effects of social in/justice being more evident where children grow up within the care system and how this might result in disengagement within education. The data would suggest a gradual awareness of a sense of agency in the way that some Education students were becoming aware of how they could adapt the curriculum and teaching approaches in order to take account of children's physical and social needs as well as taking account of cultural and religious differences. It could be that some students were also developing a sense of agency in the way that they drew upon their personal experiences to make sense of how social injustice can be manifested within the micro and exo-system. However, our findings suggested at this stage in their programme, most Education students are not overtly aware of how policy at the macro level can have a in/direct influence on practice in the micro-, exo- and meso-systems. This could reflect the nature of the cohort (out of 133 participants 120 were female and 101 identified as white British). Where focus groups contained a majority of widening participation students it was notable students made references to their own experiences of social injustices as well as those of others. Whilst a minority of the cohort have entered university as widening participation routes and it may well be that these students are more sensitive to social injustices and barriers to education. It can also be argued that it is even more important for those who identify themselves as white British to be exposed to situations out of their comfort zones to disrupt and challenge deep seated beliefs and assumptions.

With regards to the professional identity theme the data suggests Education students were beginning to relate their experiences to their emerging professional identities. Cochran-Smith (2020: 454) acknowledges the centrality of identity in her three-part theoretical framework for social justice teacher education, noting one key idea being respect for 'all social/racial/cultural groups'. She offers several interpretive lenses to support her framework, including that '*all* persons have multiple identities' (Cochran-Smith, 2010: 456, emphasis added), suggesting that it is not just Education students' personal identities we need to attend to but their emerging professional identities and values as well in order to develop sense of agency in the way they recognise the needs of children and young people with a diverse range of needs. These arguments underscore the importance of teacher agency in 'Being a Teacher in Scotland' (GTCS, 2021b) in relationship to social justice in teacher education. However, the empirical social justice literature has not been probed in terms of how it treats the question of social identity, and in particular Education students' multiple identities (Pugach et al., 2019, see also Cochran-Smith, 2020, Cochran-Smith et al., 2016).

## Implications

This study set out to explore the following research questions: (1) What are students' lived experiences of social justice as they undertake the first year of the new education programmes? and (2) How might this influence their developing identity as future educators and teachers? The data suggest that Education students already come to the programme with their own views and beliefs regarding social in/justice based on prior beliefs and assumptions influenced by their class, race and gender. However, there are also signs that the first year Education modules, combined with practical experiences in the field are beginning to interrupt and challenge some deep-seated

assumptions and raise awareness of social injustices. This in turn may begin to influence how Education students shape their identities as educators. From the number of responses emanating from placement experiences it would appear that at this stage in their programmes this is having a more profound influence than perhaps university-based inputs. However, references to courses would suggest that some Education students are also assimilating ideas generated through lectures, and discussions in seminars to some extent and are becoming more sensitive to noticing the effects of social injustice and how these play out at the micro and 'exo' levels. Education students gave no examples of enactment of social justice at the societal or macro level. This raises further considerations and questions around how social in/justice is defined as the Education programmes roll out and how Education students and student teachers can make connections between the macro, exo, meso and micro levels as they develop their understanding of social justice through lived experiences. At this stage we are unable to ascertain the extent to which these connections can be attributed to personal experience, or the university education courses. Despite the push to attract widening participation students to our education courses, these are still in a minority compared to students from other social groups. Thus, the findings from this cohort may reflect the Scottish (and indeed the UK wide) context of predominantly white British females who enrol on Education University courses (Education Policy Institute, 2020; Scottish Government, 2018; UK Government, 2021). With this in mind, we suggest that it is of even greater importance to ensure modules and placement experiences early on in university courses disrupt and challenge deep seated beliefs and assumptions of students emanating from privileged groups in society and raise awareness of issues of social injustice at all levels in society.

## *Limitations and future directions*

One limitation of this study was the impact of the pandemic on the collection of data from the second survey resulting in much lower returns than expected. Another and related limitation were that the school placements ended abruptly for the PGDE Home Economics students. Again, this is likely to have affected the richness of data. Despite these limitations our findings would suggest that we might benefit from building in more opportunities for student voice to inform our programmes. In other words, we need to consider how we can include student personal experience of social in/justice to inform teaching and learning in module lectures and seminars. This would enable us to consider the wider lived experiences Education students bring to the programmes of social (in)justice. This would allow us to be more strategic in terms of content for first year modules.

Our finding was that through community placements, undergraduate Education students were beginning to see how children, through no fault of their own, could become disengaged from education, suggest we should consider to what extent can we build in more opportunities for community place-based learning so that undergraduate Education students have first- hand experience of the cause/effect of social in/justice across the lifespan. In turn the first year courses could benefit from making more explicit policy influences on social justice so that education students become more aware of the cause and effect of policy decisions across all levels This may require a more strategic, joined up approach, identifying a wider range of community placements and school experience tasks which guide Education students to reflect on enactment of social in/justice and relate this to their developing professional identity as well as a sense of agency.

Our finding that Education students associated social in/justice with broader social science and psychology modules taken alongside other students imply this may have a greater influence on understanding of how social (in)justice is experienced through class, race, and gender. As such there may be greater benefits from getting our Education students to take more shared modules in

future years of their degree programmes or possibly including inputs from lecturers from these disciplines into education modules programmes. Our evidence suggests only two of the taught modules on the UG programme seemed to directly influence Education student thinking. Interestingly both module coordinators, a psychologist and sociologist perhaps were able to take a broader approach to aspects of social (in)justice resonating more with Education students' personal experiences. Measuring students' own social class in future research would also help us to unpick students' understandings of social justice.

## Conclusion

Our initial findings from the first year of the programmes would suggest that students' definitions of social justice are varied. Education students lived experiences of social justice are strongly influenced by what they have experienced on placement and how they constructed their understandings in relation to their individual reflections and relations as well as their connections experienced within local cultural settings. This would imply that after the first year of the education programmes the micro and to a certain extent the exo-system has a stronger influence on Education student conceptions of social justice. Definitions and examples of social justice are centred predominantly on children (micro) and particular actions in educational settings (exo). There were fewer examples of how policies and structures in the macro- and mesosystems might determine experiences of social (in)justice at the exo-, meso- and microlevels. Fewer examples were given of social justice from modules which were university based. Wider implications arising from this are around how Education students are constructing their own professional identities and agency as they engage with the programme as well as considering the identities of their own peers and pupils.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

### Funding

### ORCID iD

Sian E Jones https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2399-1017

### Note

1. In Scotland it is possible to complete an Education degree as a social science degree without gaining Qualified Teacher Status. In this paper we differentiate between Education students following an Education degree, and those who are following an Education degree to become qualified teachers (that is, student-teachers).

### References

Abacioglu CS, Zee M, Hanna F, et al. (2019) Practice what you preach: The moderating role of teacher attitudes on the relationship between prejudice reduction and student engagement. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 86: 102887.

British Psychological Society (2020) Foundations for the best start in life – How a psychological approach to policy can help tackle poverty. *Briefing Paper*. Available at: https://www.bps.org.uk/node/2541

Bronfenbrenner U and Ceci SJ (1994) Nature-nurture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychological Review* 101(4): 568–586.

Cochran-Smith M (2010) Toward a theory of teacher education for social justice. In Hargreaves A, Lieberman A, Fullan M and Hopkins D (eds) *Second International Handbook of Educational Change*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Science + Business Media, pp.445–467.

Cochran-Smith M (2020) Teacher education for justice and equity: 40 years of advocacy. *Action in Teacher Education* 42(1): 49–59.

Cochran-Smith M, Ell F, Grudnoff L, et al. (2016) Initial teacher education: What does it take to put equity at the center? *Teaching and Teacher Education* 57: 67–78.

Cochran-Smith M (2004) Defining the outcomes of teacher education: What's social justice got to do with it? *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 32(3): 193–212.

Coffey A and Atkinson P (2006) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data: Complementary Research Strategies*. London: SAGE.

Davidson E and Wright LH (2020) Realising children's rights in an ACE-aware nation. *Scottish Affairs* 29(4): 538–555.

Dyches J and Boyd A (2017) Foregrounding equity in teacher education: Toward a model of social justice pedagogical and content knowledge. *Journal of Teacher Education* 68(5): 476–490.

Education Policy Institute (EPPI) (2020) Trends in the diversity of teachers in England. Available at: https:// epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Trends-teacher-diversity_EPI.pdf (accessed 14 February 2022).

Florian L and Black-Hawkins K (2011) Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal* 37(5): 813–828.

Forbes J and Watson C, ed. (2011) *The Transformation of Children's Services: Examining and Debating the Complexities of Inter/Professional Working*. London: Routledge.

General Teaching Council Scotland (2021a) Professional values. Available at: https://www.gtcs.org.uk/pro-fessional-standards/key-cross-cutting-themes/professional-values/ (accessed 27 February 2022).

General Teaching Council Scotland (2021b) The standard for provisional registration. Available at: https:// www.gtcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/standard-for-provisional-registration.pdf (accessed 6 February 2021).

Kallemeyn LM, Hall JN and Gates E (2020) Exploring the relevance of complexity theory for mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 14(3): 288–304.

MacIntosh A, Martin EM and Kluch Y (2020) To act or not to act? Student-athlete perceptions of social justice activism. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 51: 101766.

Mello RA (2002) Collocation analysis: A method for conceptualizing and understanding narrative data. *Qualitative Research* 2(2): 231–243.

Mertens DM (2013) Emerging advances in mixed methods: Addressing social justice. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 7(3): 215–218.

Mezirow J (2003) Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education* 1(1): 58–63.

OECD (2021) *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future*, Implementing Education Policies. Paris: OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/bf624417-en.

Onwuegbuzie AJ, Collins KMT and Frels RK (2013) Foreword: Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to frame quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches* 7(1): 2–8.

Onwuegbuzie AJ and Leech NL (2005) On becoming a pragmatic researcher: The importance of combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 8(5): 375–387.

Pantić N and Florian L (2015) Developing teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice. *Education Inquiry* 6(3): 333–351.

Philpott R and Dagenais D (2012) Grappling with social justice: Exploring new teachers' practice and experiences. *Education Citizenship and Social Justice* 7(1): 85–99.

Pugach MC, Gomez-Najarro J and Matewos AM (2019) A review of identity in research on social justice in teacher education: What role for intersectionality? *Journal of Teacher Education* 70(3): 206–218.

Riddell S (2009) Social justice, equality and inclusion in Scottish education. *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 30(3): 283–296.

Riddell S and Weedon E (2017) Social justice and provision for children with additional support needs in Scotland. *Education Citizenship and Social Justice* 12(1): 36–48.

Ruitenberg C and Vokey D (2010) Equality and justice. In: Bailey R (ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of Philosophy of Education*. London: SAGE, pp.401–414.

Saldaña J (2009) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: SAGE.

Sandretto S, Ballard K, Burke P, et al. (2007) Nailing jello to the wall: Articulating conceptualizations of social justice. *Teachers and Teaching* 13(3): 307–322.

Schiera AJ (2021) Seeking convergence and surfacing tensions between social justice and core practices: Re-presenting teacher education as a community of praxis. *Journal of Teacher Education* 72(4): 462–476.

Scotland Census (2011) Ethnic group. Available at: https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/metadata/ethnic-group/ (accessed 22 February 2022).

Scottish Government (2018) Teaching in a diverse Scotland: Increasing and retaining minority ethnic teachers in Scotland's schools. Annex B p26. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govs-cot/publications/strategy-plan/2018/11/teaching-diverse-scotland-increasing-retaining-minority-ethnic-teachers-scotlands-schools/documents/00543091-pdf/00543091-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00543091.pdf (accessed 14 February 2022).

Scottish Government (2019) 2020 National improvement framework (NIF) and improvement plan summary document. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/2020-national-improvement-frame-work-improvement-plan-summary/#:~:text=Plan%3A%20Summary%20Document-,2020%20National%20Improvement%20Framework%20(NIF)%20and%20Improvement%20Plan%3A%20Summary,help%20deliver%20those%20key%20priorities.

Smith E (2018) *Key Issues in Education and Social Justice*. London: SAGE.

Sonu D, Oppenheim R, Epstein SE, et al. (2012) Taking responsibility: The multiple and shifting positions of social justice educators. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 7(2): 175–189.

UK Government (2021) School teacher workforce. Ethnicity facts and figures, UK Government. Available at: https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest (accessed 14 February 2022).

Vélez-Agosto NM, Soto-Crespo JG, Vizcarrondo-Oppenheimer M, et al. (2017) Bronfenbrenner's Bioeco-logical Theory revision: Moving culture from the macro into the Micro. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12(5): 900–910.