

## **Mindful Wonderment: Using Focus Groups to Frame Social Justice**

**Rolla Lewis**

California State University, East Bay

**Susan Davis Lenski, Swapna Mukhopadhyay, and Chris Taylor Cartwright**

Portland State University

### **Abstract**

*In the recent past many professional schools of education in the United States have embraced social justice as central to their mission in preparing teachers, counselors, and administrators to work in preK-16 settings. This article documents our initial inquiry guided by mindful wonderment into an effort to frame social justice as a collective collaboration involving support staff, faculty, and administrators within a graduate school of education. A series of focus groups made up of members of a school of education considered the commitment to social justice not only for its preK-16 candidates but also for transforming the environment and culture within the institution.*

### **Mindful Wonderment: Using Focus Groups to Frame Social Justice**

Many professional schools of education in the United States have embraced social justice as central to their mission in preparing teachers, counselors, and administrators to work in preK-16 settings. Social justice is a well-established and diverse theme in teacher education and counselor education, as well as a growing area of interest for those entering school administration. The social justice literature base includes discussing the merits and challenges inherent in infusing social justice into professional schools in education, ranging from administration to counseling and teacher education (e. g., Briscoe, Arriaza, & Henze, 2009;

Cochran-Smith, 2004; Cochran-Smith et al., 1999; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Gewirtz, 1998; Hackman, 2005; Hamlin, 2004; Johnson, 2002; McDonald, 2005; North, 2006; Poplin & Rivera, 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Social justice in counseling and the helping professions has emphasized the need for professionals to see beyond individual face-to-face interventions to embrace systemic efforts where counselors actively advocate in struggles to ameliorate social ills (Lee, 2007; Miller & Garran, 2008; Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). In embracing systemic change and directed-action, the American Counseling Association defined Advocacy Competencies that promote social justice as an ethical imperative directed toward advocating on behalf of and collaborating with, individual clients, communities, and alerting the public to issues related to human dignity (Lewis, Arnold, House, Toporek, 2002; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Toporek et al., 2009). As a profession, counseling has a vibrant social justice discourse that can inform colleagues from other disciplines in institutions of higher education. In higher education settings, counselor educators may join in collaborative efforts directed toward deepening the social justice discourse in higher education. This article shares the process and initial results of a study directed to bring higher educators in a graduate school of education together into a safe and supportive space where diverse members of the community could explore how social justice was defined and enacted in their everyday work and professional actions.

## **Background**

This paper relates how four participant researchers guided by mindful wonderment facilitated a series of focus group meetings with diverse groups within a graduate school of education that prepared professional teachers, administrators, and counselors. For us, mindful wonderment is acting in a way to maintain open wonder and curiosity about possibilities for seeing, hearing and even responding to others from a fresh perspective. Our efforts aligned with cultivating appreciative inquiry, concentration, and mindfulness in professional practice (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Greason & Cashwell, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Langer, 1989). Yet, we wanted a more expansive term to capture our stance and positioning as researchers with no preferred or monolithic position in our inquiry. Our term mindful wonderment draws upon four schools of thought; (a) Langer's (1989) definition of mindfulness; (b) narrative counseling's use of curiosity (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, Epston, 1997), (c) philosopher Arne Naess' (2002) notion that ways of seeing and being in the world are influenced by profound wondering and the recognition that anything is possible; and, (d) appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry was integrated in order to illuminate what brings life into work, relationships, and actions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999) and to avoid the usual pitfalls of 'blame and drain' dialogues that often dominate the types of difficult dialogues we were initiating. In approaching social justice with mindful wonderment, the researchers invited the participants to start with their strengths and then open themselves to sharing about their challenges. What follows is a brief summary of the teacher education and counselor education literature that informed the researchers in their collaboration.

Research regarding faculty who are guided by social justice principles and practices has been concerned with getting faculty to talk about social justice pedagogy, developing materials to improve the educational experiences among linguistically and culturally diverse students, and sharing social justice practices by those experimenting with them. In one study (Cochran-Smith et al., 1999), the social justice construct was examined by members in the same department at the same university; they found that social justice had an evolving definition and that conversations about it required careful listening and safe space for others to talk openly. In

other studies involving teacher educators, the social justice theme has been used to bring faculty together to (a) explore ways to enhance their ability to educate linguistically and culturally diverse students (The Institute for Education Policy Studies, 2004); (b) develop a university-based group of faculty and teachers to collaborate in an effort to make social justice the heart of their teacher education program (Brandes & Kelly, 2000); or (c) share how social justice was promoted in classrooms (Clayton, 2003). Social justice in these cases became a discourse between and among teacher educators and teachers about what could be done to help K-12 students who are disproportionately disadvantaged in school settings.

Schools of education educate teachers, counselors, and administrators to work effectively in helping all K-12 students. Yet the lesson taught is not always the lesson learned. Poplin and Rivera (2005) discussed fundamental challenges in promoting social justice in schools of education, and reported that the students in their teacher education program learned to be confrontational about a number of issues, especially testing, which resulted in their being marginalized by other teachers and the school administration who were held accountable by testing. The authors confessed, "a Latina deputy superintendent, who is committed to social justice, [informed us] that our students were no longer going to be hired in their large urban district.... [O]ur students were arrogant, thought they knew everything about diversity and social justice, defied their principals.... The more shocking revelation came when... [she] said, 'this would not be so bad if your graduates could teach.'" (Poplin & Rivera, 2005, p. 29). Poplin and Rivera go on to argue for a need to integrate social justice with accountability; not blindly testing but thoughtfully assessing what students are learning and how they competently achieve results in their professional practice. Cochran-Smith (2004, 2005) suggests that the standards movement and social justice discourse put the larger debate about teacher education into perspective; competence and advocacy are necessary to promote effective change.

Counselor educators have much to offer other disciplines regarding the development of professional positions that are concerned with social justice and advocacy. Counselors are often seen as change agents and advocates, and the fluctuating history and development of counseling is punctuated by times when social justice and advocacy waxed in the foreground or waned in the background and along the edges (Toporek et al., 2009). Actions ranging from the development of Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC) (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992) the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House & Toporek, 2002), and efforts to transform school counseling as an advocacy profession have made social justice a core theme in the counseling profession, and place counselors in a position to make positive contributions to community collaborations attempting to deepen their social justice discourse and enactments (Ratts, Toporek, Lewis, 2010; Sue et al., 1992).

We, the researchers in this study found a pattern of work that focused on the engagement of 'otherness' of peoples who have been oppressed or disproportionately disadvantaged in educational and counseling settings across the body of social justice literature we reviewed, and we decided to highlight the 'hurt' and, where possible, offer means to ameliorate the damage resulting from being marginalized within our own Graduate School of Education (GSE). In order to gain insight into how our own GSE enacted the mission of social justice and, hopefully, contribute a new perspective to the social justice literature, we chose to engage the faculty, staff, and administrators as members of a scholarly community in different focus groups in an exploration of our collective understanding of social justice within the GSE.

## **Purposes of the Study**

There is a dearth of literature examining the everyday practice of social justice within higher education institutions themselves. As researchers, we wondered what would happen if members of a school of education considered the social justice discourse not only for orienting preK-16 candidates but also for transforming the environment and culture within the institution. We wanted to promote social justice conversations not to initiate a myopic self-study or explore what was being done in individual courses. In the arguably medieval institutional hierarchies found in higher education, we wanted to draw out and thicken our collective observations and discuss everyday practices about social justice within the GSE in an attempt to create more connected conversations among and between disciplines and also among and between diverse faculty and staff.

The study took place in a large urban university, located in the Pacific Northwest, with a moderate sized school of education during a time when concerns regarding budget and resources were dominating the discourse. In the 1990s, the entire GSE faculty, across all disciplines represented (Curriculum and Instruction; Educational Policy, Foundations, and Administrative Studies; and Special and Counselor Education) agreed on eight guiding principles that characterized their work. One guiding principle in the College of Education includes a commitment to social justice: "We develop programs to promote social justice, especially for groups that have been historically disenfranchised" (GSE Guiding Principles). A group of four faculty members wondered what that social justice principle actually means in everyday and ordinary practice by everyone working in the GSE, including support staff, faculty, and administration. These discussions grew into a systematic line of inquiry involving a participatory research project intended to promote a collective discussion regarding the meaning of social justice practices within and beyond the GSE. As participant researchers, the four of us wanted to avoid a privileged narrative by adapting a line of inquiry that looked both within and across the institutional hierarchy toward building a participatory framework (Lewis & Borunda, 2006); our intention was to insure that participant voices – staff, faculty, and administrator – would be attended to *equally* in the study. The staff member voices, rarely listened to, would offer a unique perspective about ordinary, everyday practices and perceptions of social justice in the GSE.

We characterize our investigation as a preliminary attempt to bring diverse participants to problem set and explore rather than problem solve (Wolcott, 2001). By cultivating concentration, we wanted to invite participants to pay attention to and become less reactive and agitated in talking about social justice. By practicing mindful wonderment, we were cultivating a moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness and curiosity to open up individuals and groups to see new possibilities and connections. We knew when trust and a sense of moving beyond talk were established, a deeper probing in subsequent phases would reveal the complexities of interpretations and actions associated with social justice. Our intention in fostering mindful wonderment was to use focus groups to cultivate a collective curiosity about and examination of how the guiding principle for social justice impacted the day-to-day practices of faculty, administrators, and support staff in the GSE.

## **Methodology**

As researchers, we used a naturalistic, qualitative methodology for this study; focus groups were the primary data collection source. Focus groups are a form of data collection in which

questions are posed in an interactive small group setting in which participants are free to talk with and respond to other group members (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). Because we were part of the organization under study, we were mindful that we were participant observers in the inquiry process (e. g., Paterson, Wilcox, & Higgs, 2006; Spradley, 1980). We attempted not to interject our own personal ideas and beliefs into the data but recognize even as practitioners guided by mindful wonder, it is impossible to completely remove researcher bias from a study of this sort. We wanted to present research as a form of learning where our wonderment and reporting could become a form of building a community of inquiry during a time when the university discourse was driven by a tightening budget. Plus, the advantage of having a research team offered us the opportunity to check our individual observations with each other before moving forward with any analysis or emerging principle.

The researchers sought to bring diverse members from different departments into a conversation to explore how social justice as an explicit principle and value was actually defined and enacted within the GSE. Philosophically, as a construct informing the helping professions, teaching, and education in general, social justice is frequently tied to a wide variety of educational and emancipatory theorists and practitioners, such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, Michael Apple, and others. This broad discourse is mentioned because in the attempts to build a community collaboration involving a variety of disciplines in the setting where the study takes place, there were a variety of positions that had shaped the discourse. Because the researchers embraced the notion of the power of language for promoting social justice and equity, they wanted to model inclusiveness and respect (Briscoe et al., 2009). Chet Bowers, a noted educational philosopher and wise colleague of the researchers, criticizes social justice as being too anthropocentric. Rather than creating a conflict or schism in the GSE, the researchers embraced a 'listening to learn' stance and reflected upon such assertions as, "Social justice that does not take account of how human demands on the natural environment are affecting the lives of future generations is fundamentally flawed" (Bowers, 2001, p. 3). Thus, in building a community collaboration and in the setting where this study takes place, the critical perspective had to account for an eco-justice "understanding [that] encompasses an explicit understanding of relationships and processes, an embodied knowledge of community relationships and the ecology of place, and an awareness of the layered nature of the interdependencies of life-sustaining processes" (Bowers, 2001, p. 152). In other words, the researchers listened, read, and learned from the community ecology and perspectives alive within their system.

In a number of graduate schools of education and in the particular school where this study takes place, social justice serves as a magnet for a variety of themes in teacher, administrator, and counselor education. Social justice is framed within the discourse in terms of culturally responsive education, the promotion of equity, multiculturalism, liberatory education, connected education, generative education, eco-justice education, self-advocacy, and efforts to confront the marginalization of students, privilege, etc. (e.g., Field & Baker, 2004; King, 1991; McDonald, 2005; Taylor, 2003; Trainor, 2005; Villegas, 2002). Although the work of the researchers of this study is grounded philosophically and concerned with a number of themes mentioned, our intention in entering into a community collaboration concentrated upon examining perceptions of pedagogy and everyday practices regarding social justice within the GSE.

## **Research Team**

The research team evolved from weekly meetings devoted to discussing social justice issues. All GSE faculty and staff were invited to these meetings and invited to become part of the research team. Twelve different individuals, including tenured-line faculty, non-tenured faculty, and staff, attended the first few meetings. As the research project began to move from conversation to commitment, the team self-selected to four members: one white female professor, one white male associate professor, one Asian-Indian female assistant professor, and one white male program specialist and doctoral student. Years of experience in the GSE ranged from 1 to 11 years. Disciplines included Curriculum and Instruction, Counselor Education, and Continuing Education. Our common assumptions and beliefs as researchers included: social justice is a consistent thread in all of the courses we design, social justice as a theme and value in an organization should be re-visited regularly, and social justice talk and social justice acts are frequently inconsistent.

### **Timeline and Activities**

The data used in this study was collected during the 2005-06 academic year. The research project began in August 2005 at a GSE retreat where the research team initiated the research by conducting a school-wide discussion with faculty, staff and administrators, using a set of questions employing the principles of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999) followed by a critical incident (Stiegelbauer, Goldstein, & Huling, 1982), and ending with a focused free-write exercise. At the faculty retreat, question prompts were designed to elicit positive reflection about current practices and to illustrate the challenges inherent in a social justice mission; the notes and transcribed free-write responses were used as the initial data (See Appendix A for the GSE Retreat Social Justice Discussion Protocol).

The retreat was followed by six focus group meetings conducted during the academic year. GSE members were invited to sessions specified for staff, faculty, and administrators. Tenure-track and non-tenure track faculty participated in four of the focus group sessions. Staff members participated to two separate sessions, and administrators contributed their ideas and opinions during a scheduled administrative meeting. Groups were segregated to insure that staff members and non-tenured faculty would be able to speak freely without supervisors or administrators present. Focus groups were led by at least two research team members. Sessions were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis (See Appendix B for the Focus Group Protocol).

### **Participants**

Qualitative research derives its strength from gaining insight and understanding by studying a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002). There were 51 participants (out of a total of 59 attendees) who contributed to the focused free-write at the retreat. We did not ask focused free-write respondents to identify themselves at this point. Based on the attendance at the retreat, we estimated that approximately forty percent of the responses were from faculty and sixty percent were from staff. We then invited all of the members of the GSE to participate in focus group meetings. A total of 44 GSE members participated in the focus group phase of the study: 25 faculty, eight administrators, and 11 support staff members. Participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants interested in exploring how the social justice principle was embodied in the GSE.

## Data Sources and Analysis

Primary data sources included focus group transcripts, focused free-writes, interviews, and an online survey. Focus group discussions were the bulk of the data because they have high validity (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). As researchers, we were mindful of the challenges inherent in focus groups, such as having less control over a group than a one-to-one interview, time lost on issues irrelevant to the topic, and difficulties analyzing data because responses may be in reaction to other members' comments (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The data from the GSE retreat were used as a basis to pose focus group questions. We were interested in how the faculty and staff defined and described social justice as an operating principle. The attendees at the retreat were given questions to discuss in small groups:

1. Please tell us about a time when advocating or supporting others who had less power or privilege than you, or teaching students to do this, was especially satisfying. It could be a story about when you, in your role here in the GSE, worked to either teach students to or you personally advocated for social justice for a student, a staff member, a faculty member, or a community member. Please tell us what made this experience especially gratifying.
2. Without being modest, please tell us what you brought to this work. What skills, characteristics, traits, sensitivities, abilities helped you be effective in advocating for those with less power or privileged than yourself.

After the small groups discussed these questions, a whole group discussion followed where participants were asked to respond to a critical incident. The researchers constructed a scenario involving a single parent mother with a history of being homeless, health issues, addiction, and children needing special supports was considering becoming a teacher and asked the participants to discuss this and offer possible outcomes. The researchers took notes on the discussions. Then the participants were asked to complete a focused free-write answering the following three questions:

1. When you hear the term Social Justice, what comes to your mind?
2. What is the essential function of this guiding principle focused on social justice?
3. Given an educational system without limits, list three things that we, staff and faculty, could do to more fully advocate for those with less power or privilege than ourselves.

The second phase of data collection was the use of focus groups involving separate staff, faculty and administrator groups. Scheduling focus groups was a challenge. Despite our best intentions, access to the participants was not uniform and equitable. For example, the staff members, who were most enthusiastic and vocal in sharing their thoughts, participated during their working hours. Their supervisor granted them formal meeting times when they could leave their respective jobs to talk with us. The situation was different for faculty, who received multiple invitations to join focus groups at various times. Because of the demands of teaching and travel, not all faculty could attend focus group meetings. Those who attended the meetings were not necessarily those who were most active promoting social justice but those who made

themselves available at the times we met. The meeting with the administrators was even more difficult to schedule so the Dean put us on the agenda of an administrative council meeting. All of the administrators participated in the focus group but not all agreed to allow their participation to become part of the data set. Therefore, we excised lines from the transcripts of those who did not want their comments to be included in the study. It is interesting to note that the principle agenda item during the Administrators meeting was budget cuts; the topic was to be taken-up immediately after the social justice discussion. This may have influenced the administrators focus on social justice, either in terms of what they offered the researchers, or in how they approached their budgets reductions.

As researchers, we also recognized that observer dependency, in which the researcher influences the results obtained through the questioning process, could be a challenge. The background of the respondents, the inherent institutional power structure, the nature of the questions asked, and participant researchers impact the discussion. In focus groups, researchers are not detached observers but engaged participants in some respect, and this was apparent in our study. Although the participants guided the discussion, the researchers recognize that we may have inadvertently influenced some of the data by actively listening to what was being shared by the participants.

Because we were sensitive about our presence influencing the focus group data and to achieve triangulation, we included additional data sources to the study. Additional data sources included free-write responses, a brief online survey and interviews as primary data sources. Secondary data sources such as analytical and methodological memos on the primary data were collected as well. The multiple data sources were used as triangulation for validity and reliability purposes (Yin, 1994). Data spanned an entire school year, from the opening faculty retreat in September 2005 to the final faculty meeting in May 2006.

Data analysis was continuous and cumulative, consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss, 1987) and the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Focus group and free-write data were transcribed and copies of data were given to each of the investigators. At weekly meetings, the investigators discussed their overall perceptions of the data, methodological concerns, and additional questions. Periodically, each of the investigators wrote reflective memos about the data and the methodology. These memos were discussed at weekly researcher meetings.

The data analysis was completed in two phases. During the first phase, each investigator read the data individually using a system of open coding, where researchers analyzed text for themes that were recurrent in the data. After each investigator had arrived at a list of themes, the researchers met, compared, and refined these initial codes until they arrived at consensus (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Wolcott, 2001). As researchers, we identified twelve themes in the first reading. We then used these themes to delve back into the data and to analyze them more thoroughly. Based on this second analysis, some categories were subsumed into larger concepts. The result was eight themes referred to as the Draft Operating Principles of Social Justice.

During the second phase of the data analysis, the eight principles were used as the basis for discussion at the weekly research team meetings. The weekly meetings were often lively debates about the data that we used as reliability checks. As researchers, we then reexamined the data to ensure theoretical rigor and to ground the analysis in conceptual precision. As we



reviewed the data, we identified sample comments to illustrate each of the eight principles. During this phase of the data analysis, we made minor revisions to the eight principles to better reflect the data.

The eight operating principles identified from the data were then given to the faculty and staff to review in a manner similar to Seidman's (1998) member checking. Member checking is typically used to refine data analysis and to inform conclusions drawn from the data. The faculty and staff met with the research team in separate meetings in order to provide additional comments and to determine to what extent the eight principles described the social justice mission of the GSE. Additionally, an online survey was given to faculty and staff who were invited to rate each of the eight principles, on a scale from 1 to 5, and to give verbal or written input on how well each principle described an aspect of social justice. The survey also provided the participants with the opportunity to prioritize the eight principles and to contribute ideas that were not on the list.

## Results

The data yielded eight operating principles that elaborate the GSE's social justice mission. In this section, each of the operating principles is defined with sample comments and quotations that illustrate how administrators, faculty, and staff actively reflected on the social justice theme.

### *Theme 1. Social Justice is Based on Feelings of Empathy and Concern for Humankind.*

The data revealed that the participants believed that social justice emanated from their ability to understand other people's feelings, difficulties, and challenges. Whether the examples were individual or collective in nature, they tended to acknowledge the role of the participant as a representative of the GSE. From the fall retreat throughout the focus group sessions, participants spoke of owning a "deepening sensitivity and awareness of inequities in our society" (Sept. 19, 2005) that compels them to model social justice both within the school and in practices with students. One colleague wrote "Social = means – people's interactions. Justice = making life fair for all" (Sept. 19, 2005). Another participant said, "... from the 'I', we make the 'I's', all of us" (April 12, 2006).

The participants also expressed care, concern, and empathy for each other and believed that social justice includes being aware of power and privilege. For example, one participant pointed out that empathy for others included being encouraged to cross boundaries and join in groups where they might not usually be invited. Empathy meant taking the risk to connect to, listen to, and learn from others.

### *Theme 2. Social Justice Implies Actions Not Only Feelings*

The participants of this study were adamant that social justice is more than a guiding principle and empty rhetoric. They stated that to be able to discuss social justice in any sense, the term must be considered an action not just a feeling or an idea. One participant stated, "This is not a theory; it is a *practice* that manifests itself in daily life" (September, 19, 2005). Recognizing the personal or individual interactions, does not preclude the need for action, especially collective actions. "Rhetoric; talk. We need to move to action" (September 19, 2005) is a statement

voiced by one retreat participant. Conversations ranged from social justice in action in the individual's life to actions in professional life.

Several participants discussed ways they viewed social justice in their own private lives. One respondent related an anecdote about challenging a radio broadcast about the community's history that seemed to emphasize only the contributions of white people. The respondent called the radio station and asked them to report the contributions of the different racial and ethnic groups in the community. This story is just one of many in which the focus group participants called attention to the ways they "lived" social justice in personal/social lives. As one member stated, social justice means that people need to be "willing to make a commitment to action" (*September, 19, 2005*).

Focus group participants also discussed ways they promoted social justice as action in their professional lives. For example, several respondents discussed ways they encouraged students to work in the community, especially the more disadvantaged areas of the region. One faculty mentioned focusing on doing one thing well, such as orienting school counselors to help reduce the dropout rate by using data and measuring the success of interventions designed to improve graduation rates. Staff members discussed ways they acted in relationship to the public and members of the university community that demonstrated that social justice is more than words. Advocacy examples ranged from participants sharing how teacher and school counselor educators addressed the academic achievement gap, provided counseling services in a high needs school district, and taught professionals-in-training to use data in showing the results of what they were doing in classrooms and in their programs.

*Theme 3. An Important Component of Our Social Justice Mission is Informed, Sensitive Advocacy for Marginalized Groups*

Throughout the focus group discussions, the participants discussed the importance of learning about the cultural backgrounds of marginalized groups within the community. Advocacy was defined within the focus groups as having empathy and standing up for and with individual and groups people who are denied rights, respect, and access. For instance, one participant stated, "social justice has to start with the individual.... You have to be able to look at another human being and treat that human being the way you would want them to treat you. And it isn't always easy" (*November 5, 2005*).

The focus group participants also moved beyond relationships between individuals toward advocating for respectful learning communities. One participant stated, "A central feature of every curriculum in every school needs to be focused on the development of empathy and suspending our judgments of others.... By teaching students how to develop themselves, positive social relationships, and how to be members... of a community, we can teach all students who will then become adults... in their community" (*February 7, 2006*). Comments like these disclosed a deeper belief expressed by another participant that social justice involved the "deepening sensitivity and awareness of inequities in our society" (*February 3, 2006*).

*Theme 4. Social Justice is an Ongoing Personal Construction that Evolves into Collective Enactments*

According to the participants, social justice is first cultivated in the individual and then grows into collective acts, which in turn deepen the individual's understanding of the work. The most

common types of examples cited by the participants were respectful interactions. During an early focus group meeting one participant stated, "Well, I think the key issue with the situation ... is respect I think. And that's something that I try to carry with me when I'm dealing with faculty, staff, students, whoever – regardless of race, regardless of class, regardless of anything" (Nov 5, 2005). As one participant described social justice work as, "'out' reach and 'in' reach" (September 19, 2005).

As we progressed, we recognized that our efforts as four researchers regarding social justice in the GSE was a small collective enactment designed to move our scholarly community beyond isolated personal constructions of social justice. Our small effort was a movement by a few individuals from diverse disciplines trying to create a community where more efforts could be framed in terms of collective enactments involving advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups in the community and in schools.

*Theme 5. Despite the Inherent Organizational Hierarchy of the GSE, The Social Justice Principle Challenges Individuals to Treat Each Other with Respect, Understanding, and Professionalism*

One of the most interesting areas of the conversation emerging from the research centered on the importance of "living" social justice in the workplace. Participants were invited to explore and express concerns regarding their ordinary and everyday lives in the GSE. Although the method opened space for the trivial in the social justice discourse, the process was designed to expose how empathy and power played out everyday within the GSE. The staff was particularly concerned with this issue. Staff members volunteered many examples of times in which they felt they were not treated fairly or with respect. For example, administrative assistants discussed times when they were in conversation with a faculty member and were cut off and ignored when an administrator entered the room. In a separate focus group meeting, administrators recalled similar situations as examples of ways they had not treated all GSE members with respect.

The participants reflected the contradictions inherent in modeling social justice principles within an organization structured with power, privilege, and hierarchy. Most acknowledged the need for roles, responsibilities, and rights in order to carry out the work of the school. One participant asserted that institutional privilege and poor communication get in the way of social justice in the GSE; "Tenured faculty gets first choice at what they want to teach... it's a situation that's ripe for inequity" (February 3, 2006). Another example shows how power can play out in everyday practices. One support staff member humorously chided faculty about the tension regarding access to the copy machines in the hours before evening classes, and how priorities about who got to use the copier played out according to rank and position within the organization; she cited occasions being asked to stop using the copy machine with no explanation or apologies by faculty. The staff member, however, talked about empathy for faculty priorities and their need to make copies at that time of the day. At the same time, because of the way power played out in the exchange, she expressed that she felt more like a serf than a respected member of the GSE community when she was told to make way for the faculty with no explanation or apologies.

*Theme 6. There is Room for A Variety of Individual Understandings and Enactments of Social Justice*

No preset definition of social justice was created for the participants prior to beginning the focus groups. As a result, the data revealed a variety of understandings and many definitions for social justice. Some respondents discussed their own perspectives of social justice as in the respondent who stated, "We all define social justice in our own way" (January 31, 2006). Others looked to outside sources for a definition such as this example: "...it depends upon your definition of social justice or do you [the focus group facilitator] have a definition" (January 31, 2006)?

Individual understandings and enactments of social justice differed to the greatest extent when participants discussed their personal actions rather than their institutional membership. Social justice can become very personal as evidenced by this comment: "To talk about social justice is almost... opening the heart" (September 19, 2005). A variety of comments indicated that participants believed that social justice can become intimate and relational, growing from opening one's heart and connecting respectfully with others.

*Theme 7. All Areas of Organizational Decision-Making are Influenced by Considerations of Social Justice*

This research project occurred at a time of university-wide budget-cutting. The budget process included setting department priorities and creating lists of items that could be cut. Focus group discussions included ways the GSE should address budget issues in light of embedded social justice principles.

During the year, participants identified several cases of the GSE making decisions where social justice issues were considered. The cases included access to policy discussions, access for students, considerations for non-tenured faculty, and the expression of religious affiliation. Perhaps the most difficult judgment involved the decision to stop celebrating all religious holidays. Several of the respondents expressed disagreement with the policy of not being allowed to display holiday decorations, but another participant felt that this compact was the most inclusive practice instituted in years. These decisions were complex and not everyone felt included in the process or perceived the results of these decisions as being fair. But the respondents acknowledged that social justice was a consideration in policy decisions.

*Theme 8. The GSE is Moving Toward a More Coherent Vision of What it Means to Have Social Justice as a Central Focus of Its Mission.*

Given the diversity of perspectives and embedded hierarchies of power in the GSE, having social justice as a central focus means having personal and collective conversations about the issues. There are a range of expressions of what social justice means and how it is expressed in the GSE. Some individuals have found it very difficult to work in the GSE as exemplified by this comment: "I have encountered so many racist reactions from colleagues—that it's very painful, it's very disturbing" (February 7, 2006). Others express a more hopeful view: "I've had a very positive experience working with the Bilingual Teacher Pathway program [a program for bilingual/bicultural paraprofessionals]. I find the students to be the most amazing group of educators" (January 31, 2006).

Some participants expressed a desire for a more coherent vision of social justice. One participant stated that social justice is "a concept that's living and changing depending on the circumstances... Ongoing conversations should deepen the concept. Each new member of the conversation changes the meaning of the concept for those involved in the dialogue" (*February 7, 2006*). Participants tended to favor this view of social justice as an emerging conversation shaping practices in the GSE.

Focus group participants were most hopeful when speaking about the possibilities for promoting social justice within the GSE and community, and the actions they took to enact social justice within the GSE and the communities where they work. One participant stated, "social justice is almost an opening of the heart.... Rubbing up against comfort zone, also rubbing against people in power.... I don't even like to talk about social justice without talking about oppression, and the oppressor" (*February 7, 2006*).

Other participants expressed frustration when they talked about institutional barriers, lack of action, and community consensus about what social justice means. One participant stated, "the moral issues around social justice here in this Graduate School of Education... okay you ask us to be honest, we are honest and it disappears into a black hole. It doesn't matter. It doesn't go anywhere" (*November 5, 2005*). The participants were excited, though, about the principles developed in this study and considered them the beginnings of a more coherent vision about what social justice can and should look like in the GSE. The participants, however, believed that even with social justice principles, there should be an ongoing dialogue.

### **Weaving a Discourse of Social Justice**

One of the unique features of this study was that we researchers viewed social justice not only as an aspect of the work that we do but also how we reflect upon our workplace and cultivate our professional identities (Miller & Garran, 2008). We agreed with Bell (1997) who stated, "We believe that social justice is both a process and a goal" (p. 1). We wanted the GSE to discuss to what extent we were able to enact social justice in our workplace as well as to promote social justice to our students.

When we began this study, we discussed the importance of including the voices of the staff as well as teaching faculty and administrators. The different groups offered divergent perspectives from each other. Including the staff was a crucial decision in promoting and advocating for a sense of participatory leadership in the study. The nature of professional discourse is to build on the work of others. We considered it vital to understanding the extended community, therefore, to include staff voices in our study in order to bring forth an understanding that our everyday behaviors influence our professional practices. The effort involving diverse voices is directed at fostering an inclusive discourse about social justice and to move the GSE from isolated personal constructions of social justice from a variety of individuals and disciplines toward defining a community where efforts may be framed in terms of collective enactments involving advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups in the community and in schools. Collective enactments would involve efforts across disciplines to work in collaboration to advocate for social and school-wide changes necessary to address concerns like the achievement gap, the dropout rate, and other ills.

We were surprised by the responsibility that all of the participants felt about living social justice. Listening to staff reminded us that social justice begins with the relationships closest to us.

Whether individuals like it or not, the GSE is a hierarchical organization and some individuals are in more privileged positions in the organization than are others (i.e., tenured track and non-tenured track faculty). This study made clear that it is hypocritical to talk about advocating for people in marginalized groups when faculty do not act with respect to the people who answer the phone on their behalf. One staff member's comments were especially poignant. She said that she found it disturbing that faculty spent hours helping underserved groups become teachers and yet the organization will not help her, as a low-wage employee, find ways to finish an undergraduate degree. That example, and many others, reminded us that faculty can ill-afford to talk about standing on the shoulders of giants regarding social justice if getting to that position means standing on the backs of the individuals with the least power in the community. This study brought into clear focus that we needed to consider social justice as an everyday process of promoting democracy in our work lives as well as advocating for social justice outside the workplace.

### **Rejecting a Unitary View of Social Justice**

As the research team progressed through this study, we were sensitive about defining social justice for the participants because we wanted to learn about their views. Having a predetermined definition was viewed as stifling wonderment and creating a psychological space that would hinder discussion. By beginning with a fixed definition of social justice rather than wonder, the participants would either align themselves with the existing definition or try to refute it. We all had our individual opinions about social justice, and found that there was variety among the four of us. As the study unfolded, we found that the participants also rejected suggestions for defining a unitary view of social justice in the GSE.

As we learned about the different perspectives about social justice, we were mindful of Howard's work on multicultural growth (n.d.). To keep the conversation moving, we adapted Howard's work to show phases that can be identified as people become more committed to social justice (see Appendix C). We were most interested in showing levels of self-awareness. Our participants taught us that social justice can be discussed on multiple levels, and that different views about social justice are also valuable. Our research stance was that social justice can be defined in multiple ways as people grow in their ability to think about ways in which we advocate for the equitable distribution of resources (Bell, 1997).

Through the study, then, we were able to explore different perspectives of social justice. By exploring individuals' perspectives, our desire was to move toward an evolving consensus about what social justice is and how it could be enacted. Benchmarks, standards, and rubrics that define social justice do not exist in the GSE. If they did, they would have to be defined in terms of evolving conversations more than a set of definitions or positions. Since the research team believes there are a variety of ways to think about social justice, we found it most useful to accept each individual's perspective about social justice and continue to move with mindful wonderment toward clarifying both individual and collective enactments and how those enactments result in informed and sensitive advocacy for marginalized groups.

### **Limitations, Conclusions, and Future Directions**

There are three key limitations to consider regarding the present study. First, the focus groups took place at one university and limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, specific demographic data was not collected from the participants during each focus group. The

researchers' intention was to create an environment that did not establish a sense of otherness but invited a feeling of witness where both researchers and participants could engage as GSE community members in conversation guided by mindful wonderment about social justice practices. The lack of specific demographic data regarding the participants is a limitation in this study because there are no data regarding the specific number of sexual minorities, persons of color, and even the breakdown by gender participating in the focus groups. Third, this study was the first phase of a process exploring how social justice was enacted in the GSE. The second phase of the study was to include a critical review of the results of the study by the GSE community and a collective conversation about how best to enact social justice as a guiding principle.

The purpose of this study was to use focus group inquiry to foster mindful wonderment into how social justice was framed and enacted within the GSE. The research design was developed to invite and include the diverse stakeholders in participating in an evolving conversation about what social justice means and how it is enacted in a specific school of education. The study itself brought a heightened sense of wonder about social justice and inspired rich, layered discussions in hallways, at coffee shops, and meetings about what social justice meant to individuals and to the GSE as an organization and learning community. As researchers from different disciplines, we learned that we have a responsibility in the GSE to apply the social justice principles to our workplace as well as our work. We learned that in having a guiding principle that focuses on social justice, the GSE community needs to be mindful that social justice has a developmental dimension that requires tolerance for varying degrees of commitment and different viewpoints. We learned that social justice is an idea that is embedded in our institution, our work, our programs, and our conversations. The study clarified and expanded the overall guiding principle to eight operating principles.

The research team achieved an important goal related to fostering mindful wonderment and engagement in the social justice discourse within the GSE. We recognize, however, that what we have done is to merely set the stage for further inquiry and action. We are all at various phases in our development. The work we are promoting has to do with maintaining mindful wonderment, being vulnerable as persons, and inviting trusted colleagues to talk to us about our blind spots rather than passing judgment on us about singular developmental phases. Yet at the same time, we recognize that if the GSE is sincere in adopting social justice as a guiding principle, the community must foster mindful wonderment, inquiry, and a climate wherein individual and collective commitments to social justice will be supported and sustained. The researchers are aware of the danger of superficially embracing social justice as an institutional identity, and we feel that participants need to continue the conversation and assess the results.

We made the decision at the beginning of the study to focus on staff, faculty, and administrators. As in all studies, we had a limited amount of time and resources for this initial study. We recognize that we did not include all of the stakeholders in the GSE: students, adjunct faculty members, alumni, and advisory groups. We are currently considering ways to include these important voices in our growing understanding of social justice in the GSE.

The participants also asserted that the discussion about social justice should continue. We think the next steps will be for groups of faculty, staff, and administrators to develop concrete examples, cases, and/or scenarios for each of the operating principles. We believe that illustrating the operating principles through case studies, individual narratives, Phases of

Commitment to Social Justice (Appendix C), and the use or adaptation of the ACA Advocacy Competencies across disciplines would be an important step to keep the conversation evolving.

We know that in completing this study guided by mindful wonderment, we have opened the door to more research on ways to better understand what it means to have and live a social justice mission. Mindful wonderment is not concerned merely with how social justice is seen and talked about but with how actions resulting from social justice advocacy transform communities being served and the professionals and communities providing the service. As we continue researching the topic, we hope that our school of education will be a place that embodies our belief in social justice as well as a place that inspires new teachers, counselors, and administrators to become agents for social justice in their work and their lives.

Contact information:

Rolla E. Lewis, EdD, NCC  
Associate Professor  
Educational Psychology  
California State University, East Bay  
25800 Carlos Bee Boulevard  
Hayward, CA 94542-3076  
Email: rolla.lewis@csueastbay.edu

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## Appendix A

### GSE Retreat Social Justice Discussion Protocol

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Time-Frame</b>
Introduction	Overview	10 Min.
Small-Groups	GSE Mission/SJ Principle	20 Min.
Whole Group	Scenario	20 Min.
Free-Write	What is SJ	10 Min.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Detailed Description</b>
Introduction	Overview of project, protocols, desired outcomes, human subjects letter
Small group discussions	<p>The GSE mission is fueled by our guiding principles. One of these guiding principles has to do with social justice. Social justice can be defined broadly as efforts that advocate or support others with less power or privilege than we have.</p> <p>(1) Please tell us about a time when advocating or supporting others who had less power or privilege than you, or teaching students to do this, was especially satisfying. It could be a story about when you, in your role here in the GSE, worked to either teach students to or you personally advocated for social justice for a student, a staff member, a faculty member, or a community member. Please tell us what made this experience especially gratifying.</p> <p>(2) Without being modest, please tell us what you brought to this work. What skills, characteristics, traits, sensitivities, abilities helped you be effective in advocating for those with less power or privileged than yourself.</p>
Whole group discussion	<p>A scenario of a single parent mother who has experienced homelessness, health issues, addiction, and her children needing special supports. She is considering becoming a teacher.</p> <p>It has been one of those weeks. Although you are working very hard you do not seem to be making a dent in the "to-do" pile. The weather is turning cold and you're feeling exhausted. To make it worse, the computer is s-l-o-w. Towards the end of the day on Friday, you get a visitor, a middle-age women who appears disheveled and confused. As she fumbles with her dripping umbrella, she introduces herself (let's call her Ms. A). Her questions, punctuated with her personal history and comments about everything around her – family, friends, health care system – are a mile long and hard to follow. This is her story:</p> <p>In her high school days Ms. A really enjoyed science, particularly biology and chemistry, which led her to get trained in biotechnology and then get a B.S. in biology. She was all set to start her first job as a lab technician when she married her high school sweetheart, a Marine. She had four children in quick succession and stayed home to take care of them since her husband was posted overseas. Unfortunately, the</p>

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marriage didn't last very long and Mrs. A. was alone with her children. That's when her "troubles" started. Her health deteriorated dramatically, she couldn't keep a job for any period, and soon developed "unacceptable" habits, such as addiction, that made her join the ranks of the homeless.

Mrs. A. depended on her children to take care of her from time to time and lost touch with her family back home. On a positive note, she tried to help her children with their homework. The other kids from the shelters joined them sometimes. One of the social workers noticed her ability working with children and made her realize that she had the gift of teaching. Although hesitant, she sometimes volunteered at her daughter's after-school homework club and started telling kids about cell biology, heavy water, and so on. "It is hard to believe," she exclaimed, "the kids like to listen to me." The same social worker suggested that she should think about becoming a teacher, a science teacher.

"How is that possible?" pondered Ms. A, "I am a homeless woman with no money. Do you have any advice for me?"

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What will you do?

Focused free  
write

1. When you hear the term "social justice," what comes to your mind?
  2. What is the essential function of the guiding principle focused on social justice?
  3. Given an educational system with limits ... List three things that we, staff and faculty, could do to more fully advocate for those with less power or privilege than ourselves.
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## Appendix B

### Focus Group Protocol

#### Introduction

I want to thank you for coming here today. I know how busy all of you are, and I really appreciate your willingness to help us out with this work.

#### Moderator/Participant Roles

The basic way this works is that you should feel like this is your group -- you will be the talkers and I will be the listener. I'll have some questions that I need to ask, but what I want you to do is to talk them over among yourselves. My basic job is to make sure that we fully explore the topic and to make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.

Your participation is voluntary. If you have not signed a human subjects form, please do so now. If you want to leave at any time, you can.

#### Ground Rules

We do have a few basic ground rules, but these really are things about being groups that we all "learned in kindergarten."

- The first, thing is to **participate**. We need everybody's help to have a good group.
- The second thing is to **take turns**. We know that some people like to talk more than others, but sometimes you may have to hold on to some of things that you'd like to say, so you can everyone in the group has time to talk.
- Finally, it's all right to disagree with each other, but please be polite when you do.

#### Taping Procedures

We will be tape recording the discussion here today. That way, we can have an accurate record of what you say. The tapes will be transcribed but without names of participants.

#### Confidentiality

Any comments you make here tonight will be confidential. Your names or any other identifying information will not be included in our report. We are interested in what you as a group have to say, not in who says what. So we want you all feel like you can speak freely.

Finally, we ask that you respect each other's privacy. Whatever we say hear tonight is just for this group. I know you don't want other people repeating anything that would violate your privacy, so all basically have to trust each other.

#### Study

Our intention is to explore how social justice is defined and embodied in our work and day-to-day practices within the Graduate School of Education (GSE). Given that we are faculty, administrators, or staff within the GSE, we are participants in the system we are studying.

#### Focus Group Questions

1. First, let's all introduce ourselves and talk about our role in the GSE, how long you've worked here, and how you embody social justice in your work.
2. The GSE is an organization with a hierarchy of roles that can have an impact on our relationships. What experiences have you had that illustrate social justice in relationships

with students, staff, faculty, or administrators?

3. Let's imagine the GSE to be an ideal work environment and that everyone's working relationship did embody social justice. What would it be like?

**Sample Probes**

- Who else has had a similar experience?
- Does anyone have a different experience?
- Who can tell us another way that you "live" the social justice principle in your work here?

**Free-Write Group Question**

We have supplied you each with an index card. Please write down your own definition of social justice.

**Conclusion**

Thank you so much for your participation. If you have any other ideas or comments, please talk with any of us or email us. Thank you.

### Appendix C

#### Phases of Commitment to Social Justice

	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III	Phase IV
Description	Denial/Resistance	Awareness of differences and its impact	Advocacy position	Action plan to act upon
Emotional Response to Differences	Nonchalant Backlash  Unconscious of privilege Unexamined identity	Contrite (White and/or middle class guilt) Emphasis on respect  Guilt about privilege Critical reevaluation	Moving beyond sadness/guilt Action plans (not always reasoned) Emergence of collectivism  Acceptance of privilege	Acting on issues Work with "others."  Seeking ways to use privilege Positive and adaptive identity
Mode(s) of Interaction	Ignore people and issues	"Be nice" to people Give to charity (reinforce <i>othering</i> )	Speaking up against inequity/injustice	Passionate about common cause or issues
Group Member-ship	Dominant group membership without awareness	Insight into dominant/subaltern group relationships	Advocating for non-dominant groups/alignment across groups	Active for non-dominant group
Worldview	Ignorance/mythology/ mistakes in past/now everything is fine/move on	Historical awareness/guilt	Awareness of historical connectivity	Action to redress past/injustice as still impacting present
Approach to Teaching	Ignore unless compelled by authority. Use canned material	Acknowledge different ways of knowing and doing Tend to be simplistic/ad-hoc Stress on novelty	Creating conditions that simulate/provoke action plans on injustice.	Transformative Process Teacher as a learner, learner as a teacher
Approach to management	Monocultural Pseudo-integrative	Compliance Tolerance	Collaborative Valuing diversity Maximizing potential	Democratic
Levels of self awareness	Single perspective [ego-centric]	Development/emergence of multiple perspectives	Changing and enhancing perspectives	Ability to interrogate

Adapted from Howard, G. R. (n.d.). *Stages of multicultural growth*. Unpublished manuscript.