

Defining Social Justice through Service:  
Implementing Social Justice Curricula in a Human Services Context

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## Introduction

Traditional classroom settings have historically educated Americans through a standardized process that provides students across the country with a common curriculum. As the era of accountability continues to dictate reading and math objectives in schools, some social studies and civics teachers have designed units that address social injustices plaguing impoverished communities throughout the country and around the world (McCall, 2004; Wade, 2007). Commonly known as *social justice education* (SJE), recent research has suggested that a SJE curriculum increases students' awareness of social issues affecting communities, while simultaneously equipping students with skills they can apply in a real-world context (Einfield & Collins, 2008; Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014). As an extension to the traditional civic curriculum, scholars suggest that SJE in a classroom setting provides students with a more expansive understanding of what it means to be a productive and contributing citizen in society (Bell & Griffin, 2007; Cammarota, 2001; Finn & Checkoway, 1998).

Community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) have also provided young people the opportunity to utilize their understanding of social justice issues to address inequalities in communities (Noguera & Cannella, 2006). Without school accountability constraints, CBYOs can supplement standard civics curricula used in traditional school settings and create a space for youth to feel empowered to become change agents in their community (Heath & McLaughlin, 1994; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

While traditional classrooms and CBYO settings have been previously studied as sites for implementing social justice curricula, little is known about the benefits of providing SJE in a human services context. In particular, few scholars have examined how students' understanding of social justice evolves throughout a human services educational experience. Human service

organizations (HSOs) offer a number of services to meet the needs of individuals, particularly in marginalized communities (Lonne, 2003). Based on the social injustices that many impoverished communities face, HSOs are an unexplored setting for providing SJE. This study aims to examine the experiences of young adults receiving a social justice education that occurs within a human services context.

### **Contextual Conceptualizations of Social Justice**

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the term *social justice* has emerged as an overused yet under analyzed phrase in sociopolitical rhetoric and academic disciplines. Historically, social justice in Western societies has often been described based on social welfare or well-being. In his exploration of the origins of social justice, Michael Reisch (2002) acknowledges Plato and Aristotle as proponents of ensuring that existing social institutions function equitably for all people, including the redistribution of resources. Additional definitions of social justice have often addressed the experiences of individuals or groups of people who have had limited access to services or goods due to political and social control of colonizing and dominant populations (Fraser, 1998; North, 2006). Conceptualizing social justice is further complicated by a number of factors including varying notions of fairness, social equality, human rights, and political ideology (Bonnycastle, 2011). For example, one understanding of fairness challenges social institutions to allow individuals to actively participate in society as long as others are not oppressed in the process (Arthur, Collins, McMahon & Marshall, 2009). Although conceptualizing social justice in this way might empower individuals to consider collective societal outcomes when accessing resources or opportunities, one could argue that individuals' pursuits are unfairly limited because of the potential oppression of another population. Overall, social justice has had a prominent

contribution to the discourse on Western societies' functioning and prosperity, despite a lack of consensual understanding of the term's meaning.

Multiple definitions of social justice have emerged from educational literature, in addition to the community psychology and human services fields. For example, Olson (2007) frames the concept through Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs: physiology, safety, the love of others, and self-love. The author argues that human service practitioners provide services that increase access to resources necessary to meet individuals' needs. With a needs-based conceptualization of social justice, the human services field often incorporates efforts to increase individuals' access to goods and services (Morris, 2002). While the human services field has recently incorporated a justice-oriented approach to community work, there is a considerable gap in existing literature that explores the settings available for educating practitioners on ways to promote social justice.

While acknowledging the difficulty in thinking about social justice from an empirical perspective, Fondacaro and Weinburg (2002) argue that community psychologists have employed the concept of social justice in several distinct ways. For example, distributive justice has guided much of the prevention and health promotion efforts in communities. Empowerment studies have been rooted in procedural justice in efforts to include the voices of community members in decision-making processes (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1987; Speer, 2000). Furthermore, the critical tradition of community psychology has projected social justice as the primary objective of research as a way to illuminate social injustices. As a discipline focused on system-level analysis, Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002) suggest that ecological frameworks challenge community psychologists to think of social justice as a guiding principle for scholarship. However, as evident in the many definitions of social justice, literature from

community psychology has not thoroughly explored how one's conceptualization of social justice might influence various approaches to addressing social injustices in community settings.

Educational literature describes social justice as a goal and a process. For example, Bell (2007) argues that one of the goals for promoting social justice in educational settings is ensuring that all social identity groups fully participate in society, while having their basic needs met. Furthermore, Bell contends that the process of social justice requires collaborative and participatory work that respects group differences and the humanity in all people. Promoting social justice through education encourages social actors to acknowledge their social responsibility to advocate for marginalized populations. By theorizing about social justice in this way, scholars have recently begun to explore guiding principles for educating individuals about social justice issues, which can influence how *social justice* is conceptualized.

### **Conceptualizing Social Justice Education**

Addressing social justice through educational contexts has become more prevalent as school districts across the nation continue to highlight the disparities between affluent and impoverished communities (Kozol, 1991). Instead of ignoring the widening gap for access and equity in society, social justice education (SJE) programs seek to enlighten individuals of how injustices affect people around the world. Bell (2007) defines SJE as “an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for analyzing multiple forms of oppression and their intersections” and “a set of interactive, experiential pedagogical principles and methods/practices” (p. 4). Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the implementation of social justice education in various settings has expanded the consciousness-raising work of Freire (1970). As one of the products of the Civil Rights Movement, the major themes of SJE have focused on communities marginalized based on race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation (Wang & Rodgers, 2006). According to Picower's



(2012) examination of the historical roots of SJE, the curriculum is largely composed of a critical understanding of the causes and manifestation of oppression and inequality in society. By addressing issues of power, privilege, access, and equity, the interdisciplinary approach of SJE requires that educators are knowledgeable of social injustices in order to facilitate the learning process for students. SJE has also been closely linked to literature on multicultural education and teacher training programs, specifically the emphasis on meeting the educational needs of students who come from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moore, 2008).

Additionally, SJE shares several similarities with service-learning opportunities for secondary and postsecondary students. Service-learning courses have traditionally provided students opportunities to connect class content with local communities through service activities (Eyler, Giles & Braxton, 1997; Jones & Hill, 2001). Several scholars have observed positive effects on students' academic performance, leadership development, and critical thinking skills (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Warren, 1998). Although service-learning courses address a wide range of social issues, SJE has typically emphasized the importance of challenging systems of oppression on behalf of populations affected by unjust systems. Furthermore, SJE students are not typically evaluated on their community engagement or reflective practices. Instead, SJE prioritizes the meaning-making process students undergo throughout their experience.

The emerging field of SJE has led to a broad understanding of what a social justice curriculum would include. Over time, several scholars have identified goals, essential components and pedagogical strategies for implementing social justice curricula (Bell & Griffin, 2007; Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006; Hackman, 2005). Table 1 summarizes current literature on common characteristics and goals of social justice curricula. As one of the first scholars to

suggest guiding principles for SJE, Hackman (2005) argues that incorporating any of her five tools would lead students to become advocates for active change, but a combination of each tool would create a more effective environment for social justice education. Similarly, Carlisle, Jackson & George (2006) posit that students will be sufficiently equipped to challenge systems of oppression with a more comprehensive curriculum that includes all key principles. Based on evolving conceptualizations of social justice education, Bell and Griffin (2007) suggest three overarching goals for student development.

Table 1.

*Summarizing Social Justice Education*

Goals of SJE <sup>a</sup>	Pedagogical Strategies for SJE <sup>b</sup>	Student Outcomes of SJE <sup>c</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase personal awareness of socialization and group memberships</li> <li>• Expand knowledge of historic and contemporary social justice issues</li> <li>• Encourage action by providing models for community involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address all forms of social oppression</li> <li>• Provide challenging learning environments that nurtures the development and empowerment of all students</li> <li>• Build and maintain relationships with the community</li> <li>• Approach social justice through a systems approach</li> <li>• Commit to directly confront social oppression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mastery of social justice issues in historic and contemporary context</li> <li>• Ability to critically analyze systems of oppression</li> <li>• Develop strategy for contributing to social change</li> <li>• Self-reflect on positions of power and privilege</li> <li>• Understand group dynamics based on social identities</li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup>Bell & Griffin (2007), <sup>b</sup>Carlisle, Jackson & George (2006), <sup>c</sup>Hackman (2005)

Although social justice education continues to be theorized by scholars from multiple disciplines, existing literature has identified several sites for implementing a social justice curriculum. The following section describes two educational settings that have implemented social justice programs.

**SJE in schools.** Several studies have highlighted the implementation of SJE in traditional classroom settings where students master content and develop a sense of agency. For example, in a youth participatory action research study, Cammarota (2014) examined a student-led project

that aimed to address unequal educational outcomes that resulted from different academic tracks offered in a local high school. Students worked on the initiative during a U.S. history and government class where they applied their research skills to understand federal and state policies for secondary education. Throughout the project, students developed skills to articulate changes they wished to implement at their school, in addition to their self-identification as agents of change through positive educational and developmental experiences (Cammarota, 2011). Furthermore, existing literature has explored potential outcomes for students who have received a SJE. For example, Esposito and Swain (2009) argue that through culturally relevant pedagogy and critical reflection, students in urban schools were able to think critically about social injustices they faced in their lives. Similarly, Bettez and Hytten (2013) acknowledge the importance of producing critical communities through SJE by ensuring that students participate in ongoing self-reflection and engage in dialogue with peers. Despite emerging literature on the objectives and goals of SJE in traditional classrooms, few scholars have explored the ways in which students define social justice based on curricular activities.

Implementing social justice curricula in traditional classrooms has varied for teachers. Scholars acknowledge that citizenship and social justice education commonly occur in civics or government courses, where teachers have traditionally been able to supplement state curricula with current events (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Storms, 2012). Although social studies teachers have been able to include social justice issues in their lessons, English, math, and science teachers interested in addressing social injustices within class activities have faced barriers because of pressure to improve students' scores on standardized assessments (McCall, 2004). Because some instructors are discouraged from straying from course standards, some students have limited opportunities to experience social justice education in traditional classroom settings.

Therefore, it is important to explore additional settings for interested students to learn how to address and challenge systems of oppression.

**SJE in community-based youth organizations.** Although few scholars have explicitly linked social justice education to nontraditional instructional settings such as community organizations, these settings can help students acquire the knowledge and skills required to advocate for social change. Multiple scholars suggest that community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) are particularly successful in increasing adolescents' awareness of social justice issues, thereby extending the citizenship development that they may receive in traditional school settings (Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; O'Donoghue, 2006). CBYOs also offer critical social capital to youth, which allows adolescents the opportunity to have a personal connection to the work of local organizations (Ginwright, 2007). According to Ginwright, critical social capital differs from traditional notions of social capital because it allows adolescents to use their identity as a means for creating collective political awareness. Ultimately, youth can leverage their knowledge about multilevel systems for community change. Furthermore, critical social capital focuses on leadership development so that adolescents build mutual trust with local communities and become active change agents (Finn & Checkoway, 1998). By focusing on youth leadership, CBYOs ensure that youth are both community- and change-oriented, in addition to building their confidence in the community work they complete. These skills and mindsets provide students with a deeper understanding of what it means to be civically engaged throughout adolescence and adulthood.

Research on SJE situated in CBYOs is promising, particularly in the setting's potential to help students apply the citizenship knowledge and skills provided through traditional classroom settings. However, much of the literature on the strengths of CBYOs is limited to the experiences

of marginalized youth who are engaged with community organizations. To date, current literature provides little understanding of how young people define social justice based on their involvement with CBYOs. Furthermore, few scholars have explored the role human service organizations (HSOs) can play as additional settings for helping interested individuals increase their awareness of social justice work. The following section examines literature on human service organizations and setting conditions that support social justice education in a human services context.

### **Understanding the Human Services Context**

Professionals within the human services sector primarily focus on assisting individuals to access resources for their basic needs. Historically, social work practitioners have embraced John Rawls' theoretical framework of distributive justice by ensuring fairness of available material goods. By prioritizing the experiences of individuals and communities' access to resources, the human services sector has traditionally focused on micro-level forms of social justice (Morris, 2002). However, as several scholars argue, it is often difficult for practitioners to develop programs that address the needs of the individual while simultaneously advocating for social change (Fahrenwald, 2003; Helms, 2003; Morris, 2002; Olson, 2007). Societal institutions often determine the distribution of resources, and if structural inequity is present, human services practitioners have limited impact on the long-term experiences of individuals and communities (Olson, 2007). In order to tackle concerns at both micro- and macro-levels, practitioners must employ a multi-systems approach to social justice work that addresses procedural justice (Fondacaro & Weinburg, 2002).

Several scholars argue for a more strategic use of social justice concepts in the human services field (Fahrenwald, 2003; Helms, 2003; Vera & Speight, 2003). While there has been a

focus on multiculturalism throughout the human services sector, Helm (2003) asserts that organizations must continue to move beyond a narrow approach of preparing practitioners to work with diverse populations. By focusing on racism, oppression, and social inequities in the development of group-level interventions, practitioners could move away from individual change efforts to the “redistribution of authority and power among identity groups” (Helms, 2003, p. 309). This type of organizational shift would require practitioners to be knowledgeable of social justice issues and ways in which their work could address larger systems of oppression. Vera and Speight (2003) agree that social justice is not always an explicit focus of the training for human service practitioners. However, it is possible that the traditional components of social justice curricula could benefit the preparation of individuals seeking to engage in justice-oriented human services work.

**SJE in human service organizations.** Existing literature on social justice education suggests that human service organizations can serve as educational settings for individuals interested in challenging systems of oppression. Snyder, Peeler, and May (2008) developed a conceptual framework that focuses on the inclusion of diversity and oppression in social work training. By challenging future social workers to raise consciousness about systemic injustices through introspection, building alliances, and dialoguing across differences, the authors suggest that practitioners are capable of acknowledging assumptions and biases that may influence their work in marginalized communities. Similar to the training that pre-service teachers receive in understanding how social injustices impact their work, human service providers receive trainings on how to provide appropriate care. For example, Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore, and Hof (2008) found that the multicultural competence of students in a counselor education program increased when students were exposed to a curriculum that focused on issues of social justice.

While the incorporation of justice-related issues in practitioner development is promising, there is little scholarship that has explored the human services setting as an educational site for individuals seeking to learn more about social injustices, particularly as definitions of social justice crystallize through service experiences.

Identifying a social justice educational program with a human services orientation is an important addition to promoting social justice and helping individuals begin to articulate what social justice means to them. Although traditional approaches to SJE in schools and community-based youth organizations are significant, it is important to explore additional educational settings. Existing literature suggests that various settings for social justice education have distinct goals for students and each setting represents an educational space for individuals seeking to learn more about systemic injustice (Table 2).

Table 2.

*Characteristics of SJE settings.*

	Traditional Classrooms	Community Based Youth Organizations	Human Services Organizations
<i>Orientation</i>	Citizenship-oriented	Community-oriented	Service-oriented
<i>Objective</i>	Increase civic knowledge by exposing students to the American political system	Apply civic knowledge by introducing students to methods of civic participation	Ensure civic well-being by providing programs and resources that address community needs
<i>Learning Activities</i>	Classroom projects, service learning	Community organizing, consciousness-raising	Professional trainings, evaluation

Although human services organizations have traditionally focused on educating practitioners to improve programs designed to enhance the lives of community members, there is little evidence in recent literature that opposes this setting as a space for implementing a social justice curriculum. Additionally, few scholars have explored how the orientation and objectives of various SJE settings influence students’ understanding of social justice. Therefore, this study

addresses the following research question: In what ways, if any, does the human services context contribute to students' conceptualization of social justice?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study builds upon Nam's (2012) praxis-based approach to civic education to include traditional approaches to social justice curricula. Civic praxis, or committing to social action, aligns with the goals of social justice education and the work of human services organizations because of the application of civic knowledge in order to promote change in local communities. Furthermore, engagement with social issues and purposeful self-reflections greatly impact the meaning making process students experience throughout a social justice curricula (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). Although several scholars have suggested that students can increase their awareness and broaden their understanding of social injustices in multiple settings, similar justifications apply to the design of human services oriented educational experiences. Instead of primarily relying on students' reflective practices to conceptualize social justice, existing programs and initiatives at human services organizations provide concrete experiences for students to ground their thinking.

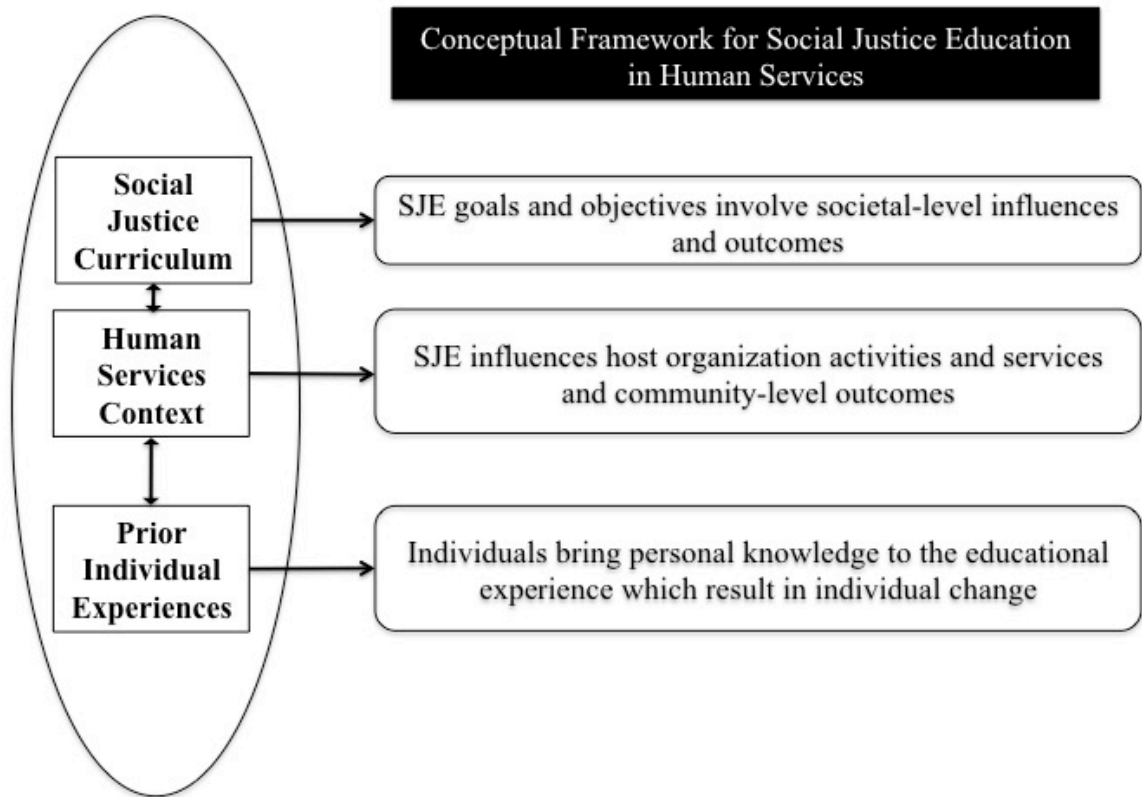
Through a services-oriented social justice curriculum, human services organizations provide a setting for individuals to acquire knowledge of causes of social injustices that is context specific. For this study, I propose a theoretical framework (Figure 1) that captures the contributing components to students' emergent conceptualization of social justice. As an essential step to moving students towards civic praxis, developing a deep understanding of social justice clarifies how an individual addresses social injustices in their community (Storms, 2012). In addition to the prior knowledge or experiences that students bring to social justice education, the human services setting provides students a specific context for their continuous reflective



practices throughout the curriculum. By exploring the meaning-making process for individuals receiving a social justice education, this study aims to explore how social justice is conceptualized during an educational experience in a human services setting.

Figure 1.

*Conceptualizing Social Justice within a Human Services Setting*



**Methods**

This study seeks to examine the experiences of students receiving a social justice education that incorporates traditional SJE components within a human services environment in order to help students define social justice. To explore the experiences of young adults participating in a summer social justice program, I conducted a qualitative study of the Summer

Social Justice Institute (SSJI). The SSJI was sponsored by the Hope Center<sup>1</sup>, a human services organization located in a southern United States mid-sized city. As one of the oldest non-profit organizations in the city, the Hope Center provides various services and resources to the residents of the public housing community where the center is located. During the summer of 2015, the organization implemented the inaugural Summer Social Justice Institute (SSJI) for six weeks. Seeking to introduce young adults to the Hope Center's initiatives, the organization recruited eight students throughout the city, including local residents in public housing and college students from the city's many universities.

Qualitative data was collected through participatory observations, semi-structured individual interviews, and group discussions with three SSJI facilitators, seven students, and five institute presenters throughout the duration of the six-week program. Multiple qualitative methods were utilized in order to triangulate findings that suggest new settings for social justice education (Tracy, 2010).

### **Participatory Observation**

Throughout the SSJI, participant-observational data were collected through daily field notes throughout the six-week program. Field note methodology was used to document data that provided an understanding of the institute's content and approach, the nature of its pedagogical activities, and the reactions of participants to the program's curriculum. Because most of the SSJI was organized by weekly themes, observations were distributed across a sample of several routine activities that students experienced, such as lectures, group discussions, Hope Center trainings, and projects related to the week's theme.

### **Group Reflective Discussions**

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym has been used for the host organization's name

At the beginning of the institute, students participated in a semi-structured group discussion to explore their understanding of social justice, their framing of human service practice (beliefs, values and assumptions about the causes and solutions to problems related to poverty) and previous engagement in social justice work. By the end of the institute, all students participated in four additional group discussions where they reflected on their experiences of the week and asked clarifying questions about the week's programmatic content. SSJI facilitators were present for some, but not all, of the group reflective sessions.

### **Individual Interviews**

After the institute ended, face-to-face interviews were conducted with SSJI facilitators ( $N=3$ ), students ( $N=7$ ), and presenters ( $N=5$ ). The semi-structured interviews ranged from thirty to sixty minutes. The content of the semi-structured interviews varied based on the role of the study participant. For example, students were asked to reflect on the overall SSJI experience and if their understanding of social justice and social justice work evolved throughout the program. SSJI facilitators and presenters were asked about their experiences engaging with students. The incorporation of multiple perspectives in order to further understand the experiences of SSJI students allows for student responses to be compared to the observations of SSJI facilitators and presenters.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed using an outside service (rev.com). Field notes were also transcribed for analysis. All transcribed data was managed and analyzed using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program. Emergent themes were identified through the use of field notes and theoretical memos immediately after data collection. I reviewed the field notes for each interview and developed preliminary open codes to help guide

the analysis of students' experiences in the program (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the next phase of coding, I created concept maps to develop a working hypothesis of how certain codes were connected to another through the constant comparative method (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Next, I created additional codes to reflect emerging themes that I identified and reviewed interviews to ensure that themes were sufficiently included. Thematic codes were uncovered through a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) by examining the SSJI curriculum and traditional approaches to social justice education. I organized the codes that seemed to represent students' developing conceptualization of social justice in a human services context.

Finally, the application of several theoretical frameworks provided a multidimensional approach to the study. The application of the classroom-based guiding principles of SJE (Carlisle et al., 2006) and characteristics of HSOs represents a convergence in the pedagogical philosophies of multiple settings. By incorporating multiple frameworks, I analyzed students' responses while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the SSJI as an appropriate venue for providing students with a meaningful social justice education.

According to Tracy (2010), rigorous qualitative research includes quality research questions that serve as a framework for the research design, characteristics of the study's sample, and the data collection and analysis process. The study aligns each data collection method with specific research questions. For example, in order to capture a comprehensive picture of how students understand social justice work throughout the program, evidence was collected through interviews, field notes, and documents that participants produced in the program. Furthermore, the study sought to understand changes of perceptions over time, which acknowledges the iterative meaning-making process that students experienced throughout the program.

**Establishing trustworthiness.** An essential component to the constructivist paradigm is providing key indicators of trustworthiness for readers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that trustworthiness is the way in which scholars can persuade consumers of research that the interpretation of work is justified. Based on the holistic nature of qualitative research, naturalistic inquiry has often been evaluated with measures that were designed for positivist approaches to research such as internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. However, as many scholars have noted, constructivist research requires complementary criteria that assess the axioms of the naturalistic paradigm (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In the following section, I will briefly describe the ways in which the study's research design establishes confidence in the findings based on measures of credibility and confirmability.

**Credibility.** Naturalistic inquiries are deemed credible if multiple participant perspectives are represented in the findings and participants can identify their truth in the author's analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Several authors have identified design characteristics that indicate that a study's findings are credible such as triangulation of sources, methods, and investigators. The use of multiple data collection methods including participant observation allowed me to experience the institute alongside SSJI students. I also participated in several planning sessions with institute facilitators prior to the program. Additionally, by interviewing program facilitators and presenters, I was able to triangulate information about the institute that students shared in their reflections. Furthermore, my interest in exploring the implementation of social justice curricula in various settings requires that I examine the experiences of all students whether they are positive or negative. This is evident in my analysis as I attempt to illuminate some of the strengths of the institute, in addition to the shortcomings in

the program design. Essentially, I was interested in sharing all of the experiences of participants and facilitators in order to contribute to an emerging body of literature on this topic.

**Confirmability.** According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), developing a sense of neutrality is an important feature that qualitative researchers must consider. Often referred to as objectivity within the positivistic paradigm, constructivist approaches to research account for the extent to which research participants confirm findings presented by investigators. My familiarity with the program participants and facilitators in this study might suggest that the findings primarily reflect my biases and beliefs about the implementation of a human services oriented social justice education program. However, I consistently reflected on my experience as a participant-observer and how my presence may have influenced their responses throughout the data collection process. Furthermore, when appropriate, I prioritized direct quotes from interviews instead of heavily relying on my interpretations of the students' and facilitators' experiences.

### **Setting**

The inaugural Summer Social Justice Institute was designed to educate young adults about local social justice issues, as well as the Hope Center's services. The following section provides detailed information about the institute's curriculum, the developers of the program, and the backgrounds of participating students.

**Institute Curriculum.** The SSJI curriculum consisted of several activities designed to expand students' understanding of social justice by participating in the Hope Center's existing programs and initiatives. Facilitators planned traditional instructional lessons for students based on various examples of social issues in the United States. For example, students were required to read significant portions of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* in order to understand the effects of mass incarceration on Black and Latino men. Facilitators provided students with

information about discriminatory practices in the job hiring process and key issues in the local mayoral campaign.

External presenters also shared their expertise during the SSJI. Presentations included justice-related topics such as air pollution effects on impoverished neighborhoods, housing resources for individuals living in poverty, child and family services, and data-driven decision making for service organizations. These presentations aligned with Hope Center trainings provided to SSJI students such as trauma-informed care, conducting home visits, and registering local voters. Students also completed activities related to the tasks of a non-profit organization like the Hope Center such as balancing an operating budget.

Service activities and job placements were central to the SSJI curriculum. Throughout the institute, students volunteered with several existing Hope Center programs such as the food bank and delivered lunches to the elderly through the Meals on Wheels program. Students also participated in canvassing efforts for the center's new charter school, as well as a voter registration drive for the competitive mayoral race. By the end of the institute, students were matched with Hope Center employees to learn more about various operational teams. For example, some students worked with the organization's development and accounting teams while other students assisted parent education programs. Designed to support the academic and professional aspirations of each student, the job placements allowed students the opportunity to observe the Hope Center's various approaches to addressing social injustices in the community.

Program facilitators also encouraged student reflection in various settings. SSJI students wrote in a personal journal at the end of each presentation in order to capture their initial reactions to the learning experience. Furthermore, students participated in weekly group discussions to connect recent activities. The weekly discussions also provided students a space to

ask lingering questions or seek clarification on material offered by the facilitators and external presenters.

**Program Facilitators.** Although the research question for this study focuses primarily on the experiences of SSJI students, it is important to understand how the backgrounds of the facilitators contributed to the design and implementation of the SSJI. Institute facilitators represented a wide range of personal and professional experiences that shed light on the perspectives they brought to the implementation of the inaugural SSJI. For example, due to his role in the Hope Center's human resources department, Richard believed that the institute would provide students the opportunity to learn more about the programs and initiatives of the Hope Center, while simultaneously preparing SSJI students to work with vulnerable populations. In collaboration with Richard, Jessica, a first-year high school educator, helped organize the institute content by developing weekly themes that addressed various issues of social justice. Finally, Shawn, the Hope Center's director of service learning opportunities, led many of the discussions about local social justice issues in the community because of his familiarity with the service-learning projects sponsored by the organization.

**Institute Students.** Like the program facilitators, students' backgrounds and personal experiences provide additional context for the perspectives SSJI students brought to the institute. Based on their backgrounds, the participants represented a wide range of experiences and perspectives that contributed to the overall implementation of the program. Furthermore, the motivation for participating in the SSJI varied for many of the students. Descriptive information about the students<sup>2</sup> can be found in Table 3.

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for participant names



Table 3.

*Student Backgrounds*

	Race	Home Community	Education Status	Institution Type	Undergraduate Major	Career Aspirations	SJB Recruitment
Andrea	White	Suburban	Rising college senior	Private	Special Education	Education	Previous Hope Center volunteer
Caroline	White	Suburban	Rising college sophomore	Private	Accounting/Business Management	Accounting	Advertisement for service summer opportunities
Cynthia	Black	Urban	Nontraditional college senior	Public	Business Administration/Environmental Studies	Local political leadership	Mentee of Hope Center Affiliate
Lisa	White	Suburban	College graduate	Liberal Arts	Elementary Education	Education	Hope Center website
Marcus	Black	Suburban	College graduate	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Education	AmeriCorps member at Hope Center
Rachel	White	Rural	Rising college sophomore	Private	Public Policy/Human and Organizational Development	Policy	Hope Center website
Samuel	Black	Urban	Incoming college freshman	Public	Fashion Design/Business Management	Entrepreneurship	Family member of Hope Center employee

SSJI students entered the institute with a variety of backgrounds. All of the students were either currently enrolled in college or a recent graduate. Also, most students studied education or business during their college experience, which aligns with their stated career aspirations. Students also found out about the institute in various ways. For example, Samuel’s mother worked at the Hope Center and wanted him to participate as a summer activity. Lisa discovered the institute when looking for employment opportunities on the Hope Center website. Overall, SSJI students entered the program with different educational and personal experiences that influenced their initial understanding of social justice.

## Findings

Throughout the institute, students revisited their interpretations of the term *social justice* in formalized reflective settings. The following sections provide evidence of the ways in which students' understanding of social justice issues evolved based on their experience throughout the SSJI. Specifically, most students moved from describing social justice in distributive terms of equity and providing general services or resources to individuals to a more procedural understanding of how systemic factors have created social injustices. Additionally, students developed a sense of personal awareness regarding their role in addressing social injustices in the local community.

### Initial Conceptualizations of Social Justice

Several students initially identified increasing equal opportunities, resources, and services as key components of social justice. Comments about access and equality were often generalized in order to provide a comprehensive or inclusive definition that could be applied to multiple communities. For example, Marcus defined social justice as “providing everyone with equal opportunity and preparation to achieve a certain standard of living.” Similarly, Caroline considered “social and economic inequalities based on lack of opportunities” to be the root cause of social injustice. Students also acknowledged that access to public resources and services is often unequal but most students did not specify who needed more equitable access or what resources should be accessible. However, Samuel defined social justice with racial and gendered undertones:

Social justice is the quest to obtain equal access to one right [*sic*] as well as receive equal and fair treatment from others. I once heard someone say social justice is the quest for everyone to be treated like the average white, straight male.

Samuel's definition alludes to the standard of equality that is desirable when addressing social injustices. His comment suggests that there is a particular subpopulation that currently has access and equality, and receives fair treatment. As one of the few students to imply that there are societal privileges that are unavailable to certain groups of people, this definition seemed to align with SSJI objectives and the work of the Hope Center.

Students' preliminary definitions of social justice also included the relationship between expanded opportunities and individual achievement. For example, Cynthia described social justice as "providing opportunities to people—ways to help them achieve—the place in society they desire." Furthermore, Rachel defined social justice as individuals having the "same opportunity as others," regardless of where someone is from. Both students emphasized equality and access in their understanding of social justice, but they also addressed increased opportunities as a byproduct of social justice, particularly on an individualized level.

### **Social Justice Approaches**

During the first week of programming, students also discussed their initial thoughts on methods to address and remedy social injustices. Several students referenced the need for individuals in places of power to utilize their social positioning and advocate on behalf of marginalized communities. For example, Lisa stated that her understanding of ensuring social justice included "using your personal privileges to help others in difficult situations achieve a better life." Similarly, Andrea described social justice as "striving to correct and modify behavior, attitudes, perceptions, policies, and laws that are seen as unfair and biased." Both Lisa and Andrea acknowledged that advocacy on individual and systemic levels are necessary but they offered little context of how reforms can be initiated or enacted.

Although students identified potential solutions for addressing social injustices, few students discussed how recognizing systemic causes for social injustice informs approaches to address inequities. As one of the few students to describe potential causes of social justice, Cynthia acknowledged that differences in life experiences can be attributed to societal forces. In her preliminary definition, Cynthia described social justice as “figuring out what is causing injustice in society (poverty, hunger, etc.) and looking for a solution.” Although she does not explicitly state how one would uncover the causes of injustice or the appropriate pathway to proposing and implementing solutions to alleviate poverty and hunger, for example, Cynthia suggests that there are possible solutions to address the causes of injustice.

**Social justice work.** Given the human services orientation of the institute, students also referenced the ways in which social injustices could be addressed through the work of institutions such as the Hope Center. When asked to describe examples of social justice work, SSJI students provided several examples related to community and political action. For example, students identified activism for policy changes as a key component of social justice work, including supporting advocacy efforts to demand reform from government officials through protests, demonstrations, rallies and marches.

In addition to activities that promote activism and advocacy, students also described social justice work as collaborating with the local community through various activities. For example, students identified the importance of service projects such as mission trips and assisting in beautification projects. Moreover, students acknowledged the importance of empowering community members in “marginalized communities” through educational efforts. Although the Hope Center does not directly participate in policy change efforts, the organization provides space for community members who are interested in advocacy work. By “making people aware

of injustice,” students described how social justice work included constant communication with the local community in order to identify specific needs and strengths. Through purposeful collaborative efforts, the SSJI students believed that social justice work encouraged strengths-based programming and outreach that would “empower [community] members to create systemic change.”

### **Defining Social Justice during SSJI**

Throughout the SSJI, institute activities at the Hope Center provided additional context for students’ understanding of social justice. After participating in several Hope Center initiatives and programs, students frequently referenced institute activities when defining social justice at the culmination of summer programming. Specifically, students discussed their experiences working with community members through various institute activities such as Meals on Wheels, volunteering in the food bank, and registering local residents to vote. In each of the experiences, students described the impact of their interactions with the local community. For example, Marcus recalled one of his experiences on a local Meals on Wheels route:

Everybody needs help. This was a guy, I think he said he was in the Navy at one point, and he came home. He wasn't disabled at that point, and he worked for a couple of years. Then, he eventually got injured in some accident, and now he's at home. He could barely get out of bed, and it took him about, I would say, about 3 minutes to come to the door and actually open it up...that just made me look at it as we have to take care of everybody, just make sure everybody's secure.

Everybody has the food that they needed and have their basic rights.

By contributing to the social justice work of the Hope Center through Meals on Wheels, Marcus had the opportunity to use a personal interaction as additional context for his understanding of

social justice. Based on his experience at the SSJI, he realized that ensuring that individuals “have their basic rights” represents one aspect of social justice that he had not considered previously. The same Meals on Wheels experience helped Andrea to understand that addressing social injustices requires multiple approaches. Andrea stated:

The food bank is giving people what they need right now, and I like to think of that as your first step. If we can get you a meal right now, then we can start thinking about what you need tomorrow and next week...I feel like [Meals on Wheels] could be used more towards social justice, but for right now it's just meeting a need in the community, like if we were delivering meals and also bringing our voter registration clipboards which we did a little bit.

Andrea continued to describe multilevel approaches to addressing social injustices by describing another Hope Center activity she observed during the SSJI:

Also, with the food bank, I like how they've started doing community outreach programs, too. They just started a garden, and they had this awesome event on a weekend where they brought out all these kids, and they were planting everything and learning about vegetables. Education is a huge part of social justice, and having access to healthy food is so critical.

While Andrea’s experience in the local community prior to the SSJI provided additional context for the work of the Hope Center, several students found that the program presenters increased their awareness of how communities are impacted by social injustices. For example, several students were moved by Dr. Tate’s presentation on how corporate air pollution in the local community disproportionately affects communities of color living in poverty. When reflecting on Dr. Tate’s research, Rachel shared that she had “not thought of environmental justice as being a

part of social justice.” By exposing students to local injustices, the SSJI curriculum encouraged students to expand their understanding of social justice through the work of the Hope Center.

Although several institute activities were designed to promote a deeper conceptualization of social justice, most students acknowledged that their definition of social justice evolved because of personal reflections throughout the institute. In particular, students recognized the importance of listening to the experiences of marginalized communities when seeking to identify potential causes of and solutions to social injustices. For example, Lisa shared the following:

We have to come in knowing that we have expertise but we're not the experts, and that goes into empowering people to create solutions with you. So, I think, for me, it was just realizing that everybody has a story, and everybody has reasons for doing what they do, and it's more about understanding them and listening to understand them, rather than listen with the intent to reply and having an answer for them all of the time.

Through Lisa’s interactions with the local community during the SSJI, she realized that addressing social injustice requires incorporating the voice of oppressed communities. By stating, “we’re not the experts,” Lisa suggests that when working towards social justice, everyone’s narrative or story is important to create solutions. Cynthia further explains this by connecting her professional aspirations to her SSJI experience:

I know I haven't quite figured out everything about how to address, but it definitely has made me realize that, especially with the voter registration that made me like we could get more on the ball as far as how we deal with a lot of the things that are the barriers for voting rights like the whole felony and because you're a felon from 30 years ago that still affects your rights. That really made me

realize I needed to brush up on my information, get to reading, do a little more research, find out what it is how I need to go about doing these things and who I can talk to and network would probably help me out.

Like Lisa, Cynthia's experience with SSJI activities expanded her understanding of social injustices and approaches to social justice work. Specifically, her experience throughout the program encouraged her to think of additional steps she can take in order to address social injustices in her work.

While some SSJI students attributed their evolving understanding of social justice issues to the work of the Hope Center, several students stated that their definition of social justice was not influenced by institute activities. These students often referenced their personal background or previous educational experiences as the foundation of their conceptualization of social justice. For example, Rachel steadfastly connected social justice with increasing opportunities for individuals to improve their life outcomes throughout the institute:

I can tell you that when I first came in, I thought, to me social justice is creating opportunities for people. I would say that I still completely agree with that definition. I think social justice, to me, is giving them the opportunity to reach a higher education, to go to college. Whether they want to take that opportunity or just enter the workforce after high school, that's completely up to them. I think giving that option is social justice, to me.

Though Rachel's reflection suggests that the SSJI curriculum had little influence on her understanding of social justice, all of the students shared at least one example of how their initial definitions were nuanced by participating in the institute. Given the wide-ranging academic



backgrounds and career aspirations for students, the magnitude of SSJI influence on defining social justice throughout the summer varied amongst students in the program.

### **Discussion**

Responses from SSJI students suggest that without structured experiences that promote critical reflection, individuals' emerging definitions of social justice can lack specificity. By engaging with Hope Center programs, students broadened their understanding of social justice issues through an iterative process which included active engagement in the center's programming and structured time to reflect on their summer experience. Through the Hope Center's human services context and non-traditional approach to social justice education, students' meaning-making experiences contribute to existing literature on settings for educating individuals about social justice issues. The following section will briefly examine three ways students' initial conceptualizations of social justice expanded throughout the SSJI: identifying potential causes of social injustices, recognizing the importance of local context in social justice work, and understanding the role of human services organizations in addressing systems of oppression.

**SJE student outcomes.** The SSJI provided students the space and opportunity to explore potential causes of social issues, which incorporated notions of distributive and procedural social justice. Initially, students described social justice using phrases such as “increasing opportunities” or “promoting equality,” Existing literature on social justice work often conflates increasing opportunities with equality (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Zalaquett et al., 2008). Although there are numerous scholars who advocate for equity-based work, SSJI students refrained from offering specific details of the manifestation of equitable resources at the beginning of the institute. Based on the context of the summer social justice institute, increasing

opportunities for individuals could mean providing services through the host organization for those who might have limited access otherwise (Helms, 2003). However, through their experience with the Hope Center, students were exposed to the ways in which the organization's programs and services sought to promote procedural justice. The need for programs such as Meals on Wheels is rooted in the reality that marginalized communities must often seek resources from organizations like the Hope Center because of inequities that are perpetuated through an unjust society. One approach to ensuring social justice acknowledges the need for equal resources through entities such as the Hope Center (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Olson, 2007; Reisch, 2002), while another social justice strategy challenges the systems and institutions responsible for inequities (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1987; Speer, 2000). Overall, the human services orientation of the SSJI supplemented traditional objectives of social justice education to help students expand their understanding of how organizations promote distribute and procedural justice.

Additionally, most students were able to incorporate personal observations of marginalized communities in their definitions of social justices, instead of simply speaking of generalized experiences. SSJI activities supplemented students' evolving understanding of social justice through experiences that were rooted in a localized context. Initially, few students explicitly identified specific populations that have experienced oppression or injustice. Several scholars have warned against colorblind and heteronormative narratives when challenging systems of oppression (Esposito & Swain, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Addressing injustices in a broad or generalized manner fails to acknowledge the lived experiences of vulnerable populations, while simultaneously ignoring specific oppressive policies and structures (Bell & Griffin, 2007; Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006). Throughout their institute experience, students

interacted directly with the community immediately situated around the Hope Center. These interactions allowed students to consider the lived experiences of the people who are faced with social injustices on a daily basis. Although institute facilitators did not structure all of the interactions between students and residents, the institute's curriculum inherently immersed students within the local community through the work of the Hope Center.

The SSJI also provided students an experiential understanding of the role of human services organizations in efforts to address systems of oppression. Initially, few students explicitly referenced the human services context in their definition of social justice at the beginning of the institute. Moreover, students neglected to address how social justice can be achieved through organizations such as the Hope Center. This suggests that students possessed limited contextual knowledge of how various approaches—including the human services sector—could be leveraged to address social injustices. Given the academic and professional backgrounds of SSJI students, it is not surprising that students refrained from articulating social justice competencies that continue to guide practitioner development in the human services field (Vera & Speight, 2003). However, as a setting for social justice education, the Hope Center's human services orientation provided additional context for students' familiarity with approaches to address social injustices through institute activities. As a result, students were able to broaden their conceptualization of approaches to tackle social justice issues through their shadowing experiences with Hope Center employees.

During the SSJI, students engaged in an iterative process of reflection and action, in which they gained new and expanded understandings of social justice. Although some students believed that their definition had not changed by the end of the institute, all students described how exposure to various perspectives throughout the institute encouraged them to revisit their

understanding of social justice. Expanding one's understanding of social justice through concrete experiences over time aligns with traditional objectives of SJE. As several scholars have noted, SJE seeks to increase students' awareness of social injustices instead of offering a universal definition of social justice (Bell, 2007). Through this educational experience, students had the opportunity to self-reflect on individual and collective positions of power and privilege that challenge or contribute to the existence of social injustices (Hackman, 2005). It is to be expected that this process can vary on an individual basis. However, through structured reflective practices, the human services orientation of the SSJI exposed students to the Hope Center's approach to address the realities of social injustice in the community. Therefore, the SSJI can be described as an additional setting for social justice education that has not been fully explored in current literature.

### **Human Services Organizations as Social Justice Education Settings**

Students' nuanced understanding of social justice issues through the SSJI suggests that the Hope Center served as an educational setting for social justice curricula based on traditional SJE goals and objectives. By orienting the SSJI curriculum around the Hope Center's existing programs and services, program facilitators exposed students to the lived experiences of impoverished communities through a human services lens. The following section will briefly examine several ways in which the services orientation of the SSJI fostered a setting for social justice education and contributes to existing SJE literature.

Pedagogical strategies throughout the institute align with previous implementations of social justice curricula (Table 4).

Table 4.

*SSJI Pedagogical Strategies and Activities*

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Pedagogical Strategies for SJE within Human Services Context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Address all forms of social oppression <i>Curriculum included sessions on voting rights, gender pay differences, mass incarceration in communities of color, discriminatory hiring practices, environmental justice, housing availability, and food deserts</i></li><li>• Provide challenging learning environments that nurtures the development and empowerment of all students <i>Individual and collective reflection occurred throughout the institute, particularly after experiential learning opportunities</i></li><li>• Build and maintain relationships with the community <i>Students interacted with local community members through Meals on Wheels, the Food Bank, voter registration, and volunteering at the Hope Center's service desk and childcare program</i></li><li>• Approach social justice through a systems approach <i>Program presenters included researchers, policymakers, and agency leadership to address systemic factors contributing to the marginalization of specific populations</i></li><li>• Commit to directly confront social oppression <i>Hope Center employees mentored students to connect students' future career aspirations to the organization's approach to addressing social injustices</i></li></ul>

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Previous studies on traditional classroom and community settings for SJE emphasize the supplemental learning that students receive compared to a standards-based approach to education (Bell, 2007; Esposito & Swain, 2009; McCall, 2004). In their reflection, students offered numerous examples of ways in which social injustices were illuminated throughout the institute. This observation suggests that the SSJI curriculum and human services activities contributed to the students' conceptualization of social justice. Moreover, designing experiential learning opportunities complemented efforts to expand students' awareness of local social justice issues. Although traditional SJE settings seek to empower students to build and maintain relationships with the community (Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006), few scholars have described how experiential learning can be incorporated within a social justice curriculum.

Furthermore, the Hope Center's organizational practices aligned with traditional goals for SJE and provided context-specific experiences to help students define social justice. Existing

literature on SJE in community organization settings highlights the ways in which students are embedded in the organization's work (Ginwright, 2007). The SSJI activities such as volunteering in the food bank or registering voters were designed to expose students to the Hope Center's approach to addressing the social justice issues that students discussed in facilitator-led sessions. Through these activities, students received professional development that could prepare them for work in the human services sector. These authentic experiences were not simply created for the SSJI. Instead, students participated in activities that were already implemented and operating at full capacity. Additionally, mentorship opportunities with Hope Center employees offered students spaces to learn from practitioners working to address social injustices. Unlike traditional settings for SJE that primarily focus on educating students on systems of oppression and marginalization (Cammarota, 2014), the human services orientation of the SSJI also helped students learn about the functioning of an organization addressing social injustices. As a result, SSJI students essentially received professional development for future work as social justice practitioners.

Finally, the meaning-making process SSJI students' experienced while conceptualizing social justice suggests that the work of human services organizations can address conventional goals and expected outcomes of SJE. Traditional settings seek to empower students through various learning experiences (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014; Rubin, 2007). Student responses at the end of the institute demonstrate several ways that the institute assisted students to consider their own justice-related courses of action in school and their career trajectory. Additionally, reflection activities throughout the institute inspired students to think critically about their understanding of social justice. As a result, many students articulated their personal role in uplifting community voices and continuing to learn how social injustices can be addressed at various levels of society.

Essentially, SSJI students conceptualized social justice in a way that encouraged them to consider their potential contributions to challenging systemic oppression, which represents several traditional goals for SJE.

**SSJI curriculum limitations.** Although SSJI students approached many of the traditional objectives of a social justice curriculum, the human services orientation of the institute did not meet some of the vital principles of SJE. First, the six-week duration of the SSJI introduced students to community members but offered students little guidance on ways to maintain community relationships. This is an important outcome of traditional settings for social justice curricula that could have been emphasized as students completed their institute experience. Secondly, student responses suggest that institute activities had marginal impact on students' desire to directly confront social oppression in their academic or professional endeavors. While the students' backgrounds suggest that many of them would enter service-oriented fields such as education and public office, traditional approaches to SJE seek to inspire students to make social justice work a long-term commitment. The SSJI may have provided students some of the knowledge and skills necessary to identify pathways to address social injustices, but student reflections suggest that additional support from the program facilitators may have encouraged future student advocacy in the local community.

Furthermore, the institute offered students a narrow perspective of social justice issues affecting communities as students developed their definition of social justice. For example, program facilitators primarily focused on populations oppressed because of racial identity or social class. However, few students explicitly discussed issues of race as a part of their understanding of social justice. This observation is troubling given the demographics of the institute participants and the community that they worked with throughout their summer

experience. During the Meals on Wheels routes, voter registration drives, and air quality testing in resident homes, students interacted with a predominantly Black public housing community, including recent immigrants from countries such as Somalia. Student discussion groups rarely included conversations about populations historically oppressed based on gender, religion, sexuality, or native status. By omitting a wide range of social justice topics in the institute curriculum, the SSJI offered students limited opportunities to engage with multiple forms of social oppression. It is unclear why the curriculum presented a narrow depiction of social injustice but as a novel setting for SJE, it is possible that the Hope Center's understanding of social justice continues to evolve through the organization's existing services and programs. Because of the exclusion of various oppressed populations, the SSJI curriculum failed to address how intersecting identities lead to the marginalization of oppressed people (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013).

Finally, the institute curriculum did not comprehensively incorporate a systems approach to addressing social injustices, which might have impacted how students defined social justice. As a nonprofit organization, the Hope Center seeks to provide resources and services for individuals living in poverty. While SSJI students participated in many of the center's programs throughout the institute, program facilitators and presenters cursorily discussed the ways in which multiple systemic influences contributed to the presence of social injustices in the local community. Much of the student discussions about systemic approaches to addressing social injustices were centered on the mass incarceration of Black and Latino men. However, such conversations were largely in response to Michelle Alexander's (2012) argument in the book *The New Jim Crow* about injustices occurring in the American criminal justice system. SSJI presenters and facilitators did not consistently link institute activities such as the need for a local



food bank to larger systems in society. Essentially, the human services orientation of the SSJI influenced the curriculum to focus more on providing services to oppressed people instead of actively addressing the complex systems that created the need for additional human services for communities living in poverty. This approach to SJE suggests that context or setting can influence the extent to which traditional objectives of SJE are achieved.

### **Implications for Social Justice Education**

Overall, including the human services sector as an additional setting for SJE expands existing notions of appropriate contexts for educating individuals about social justice issues. Previous scholars have studied a narrow sample of traditional educational sites for SJE (Bell & Griffin, 2007; Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006; Finn & Checkoway, 1998). However, it is important to identify additional contexts that can serve as spaces that use education as a way to promote social justice. Additionally, the human services orientation of the SSJI contributes to existing pedagogical strategies for the implementation of social justice curricula, particularly as it relates to students' understanding of social justice. First, strategically planning opportunities for students to reflect on new information or skills throughout the institute seemed to be important for SSJI students' learning outcomes (Hackman, 2005). Given the various academic backgrounds and personal experiences of the students, activities that encouraged individual reflection allowed students to consider how their future academic or professional endeavors might be influenced by their institute experience. Additionally, participating in larger reflection groups seemed to benefit students who had lingering questions about a particular reading or a presentation from a program facilitator. In a supportive environment, students also had the opportunity to challenge each other to articulate possible solutions to address social injustices. Periodic discussion groups assisted students' sense making process by engaging in a more

critical analysis of institute content and activities (Bell, 2007). Although traditional settings for SJE encourage recurring opportunities for student reflection, the SSJI activities offered students a standardized experience to guide their emerging conceptualization of social justice work.

Another teaching strategy used during the SSJI included balancing instruction about social justice issues with experiential learning opportunities, which the findings suggest contributed to students' conceptualization of social justice. On a typical day of SSJI programming, students would spend half of their time at the Hope Center gaining knowledge about social injustices through readings, panel discussions, and facilitator presentations. The second half of their day often included some type of service activity such as completing Meals on Wheels routes or registering residents to vote. There is extensive literature on the learning outcomes for students in service-learning courses in secondary and postsecondary education (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). However, few scholars have explicitly examined how complementary service activities help students deepen their understanding of content presented in a classroom setting. Typical service-learning projects are often associated with one specific topic area or academic focus. The SSJI curriculum demonstrated one way in which student knowledge attainment could be coupled with experiential learning.

Future settings for social justice education can utilize the findings from this study to develop training programs for individuals who wish to practice social justice work in a human services context, while simultaneously helping individuals to define social justice. Including SSJI students in the Hope Center's services and activities offered opportunities for students to consider future employment in the human services field and apply their working knowledge of social justice work. Long term, the findings from this study could support a pipeline of social justice workers who are equipped with a specific toolset to address injustices in the community.

## **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research**

This study possesses several strengths. First, the findings offer a significant contribution to existing literature about emerging settings for SJE. Few scholars have identified human services organizations as an additional site for this type of educational experience and the responses from participants suggest that some of the traditional SJE goals are achievable in this context. Secondly, the study's methods incorporated multiple perspectives in order to understand the experiences of SSJI students. By interviewing multiple stakeholders, the experiences of students were compared to the responses of program facilitators and presenters in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the educational experience. Additionally, the application of several theoretical frameworks provided a multidimensional approach to the proposed study. Incorporating classroom-based guiding principles of SJE and characteristics of HSOs represented a convergence in the pedagogical philosophies of multiple settings. By examining one context through the lens of another, this study created an opportunity for classroom- and community-based practitioners to identify best practices for SJE implementation.

The findings for this study have several notable limitations. First, the number of students enrolled in the SSJI limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the small sample size allowed for an in-depth study of student experiences, future research on the implementation of a SJE in a human services context would be necessary in order to develop a generalizable theory for this setting. Furthermore, a larger sample would have increased the diversity of academic and personal backgrounds of SSJI students. Participating in the institute suggests that SSJI students possessed a considerable level of interest in the components of the curriculum. An intrinsic desire to enroll in the SSJI is similar to youth who voluntarily receive a social justice education through community-based youth organizations. Future explorations of a human services oriented

social justice education should include students in compulsory educational settings (i.e. a traditional classroom) to observe a wider range of perspectives on social justice.

Another limitation relates to capturing each phase of the sense making process for students. Throughout the SSJI, I sampled program activities in order to gather a comprehensive understanding of the total institute experience. During participant observations, I frequently asked students about their experiences in specific communities and how it related to their understanding of social justice. Although I was able to gather these reflections during service activities, it is unclear if students' reflections would have been different in a more formal setting. Weekly discussions groups were designed to help students collectively reflect on the week's activities. However, it is possible that students either refrained from sharing their candid thoughts in these groups or were unable to recall their thoughts days after the activity.

Furthermore, limited information about students' backgrounds was gathered during the study. Because this study was primarily about the experiences of the students during the institute, I knew little about the students' lives prior to the program. Demographic information analyzed was self-reported by students throughout the program in both formal and informal group settings. Future research on the evolving conceptualization of social justice should collect more data about the personal experiences of students and how their background has influenced their understanding of social justice issues. For example, SSJI students chose to participate in this educational opportunity, unlike students in traditional classroom settings where teachers and school leadership often determine if SJE concepts are included in the curriculum. Additional research is needed to understand the motivation for students to participate in this type of educational experience.

Although this study revealed some of the strengths and limitations of a human services orientation to social justice education, additional research is necessary to solidify experiences such as the SSJI as an approach to educate individuals about social injustices. Traditional settings for SJE often include students younger than SSJI participants. Future research should explore how the human services context influences students in elementary and secondary school and their understanding of social justice. Moreover, learning outcomes for students should further examine the short- and long-term outcomes of receiving a social justice education. Additional research is required to determine if the professional development SSJI students received from the Hope Center encourages students to become social justice practitioners.

Finally, it is important for future investigations to consider the ways in which the contemporary political climate influences how social justice is conceptualized. As evident in the responses of SSJI students, addressing social injustices requires challenging normative societal institutions and systems that organizations such as the Hope Center operate within. Although the SSJI and other iterations of SJE can be classified as embedded experiential education, traditional objectives and student outcomes for the curriculum are rooted in disrupting the status quo on behalf of oppressed populations (Bell, 2007; Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006; Hackman, 2005). One could argue that implementing a social justice curriculum represents a political activity in which facilitators and students ascribe to a specific set of values around social equality and human rights. On the other hand, SJE could be considered a value-neutral approach to engaging students in their local communities. Future research should further explore SJE as a political activity as it relates to the setting in which the curriculum is implemented.

## **Conclusion**

Conventional approaches to implementing social justice education include settings such as traditional classrooms and community-based youth organizations. Findings from this study suggest that human services organizations can also serve as an educational venue for students interested in learning about the causes of and potential solutions to social injustices. By providing a service orientation to a social justice curriculum, students broadened their understanding of social justice while participating in an experiential learning environment. Although current literature has not identified human services organizations as a site for social justice education, many of the key objectives of the curriculum were addressed through the summer social justice institute.

Over the course of the program, students developed a more nuanced understanding of social justice issues by participating in several Hope Center activities, in addition to engaging with the institute curriculum. By the end of the institute, all students personally interacted with individuals who lacked various resources, which provided students additional context about how social injustices affect the lived experiences of vulnerable populations.

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