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# A Visionary Working Model for Pursuing Social Justice Praxis Through Educational Psychology Courses



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## Abstract

**Introduction:** We propose a visionary working model to normalize the pursuit of social justice praxis in educational psychology courses. Using our undergraduate course as an example, we discuss our roles as instructors, curriculum, and pedagogical strategies for forward progress.

**Statement of the Problem:** Despite stated commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion as integral to psychology research and practice (e.g., American Psychological Association statements), most educational psychology courses are highly theoretical and do not prepare learners to counter social injustices in praxis that are meaningful for the global majority.

**Literature Review:** We make the case for why educational psychology courses are ideal for training students for social justice praxis, and outline how diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies in the literature can be used as levers.

**Teaching Implications:** We provide assignment resources to illustrate how instructors can begin to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout a course to co-construct more just futures.

**Conclusion:** Actualizing this visionary model of normalizing social justice praxis in educational psychology courses requires multi-level supports at global and local levels. Using case studies to address complex social injustices within an engaged teaching and learning environment has significant potential to empower and prepare learners to forward social justice.

Pursuing social justice (SJ) in education is an ongoing process that should engage stakeholders at multiple levels within and beyond education institutions. Yet, we find more theory and policies around SJ education than practicable models. In particular, there is a need for more “small teaching” (Lang, 2017) examples by and for novice practitioners at the course level—“strategies [that] can empower us to improve our teaching in small, manageable steps” (Lang, 2017, p. 6). We argue that educational psychology (EP) courses—often situated in schools/colleges of education—are prime sites for preparing education practitioners to illuminate, deconstruct, and actively counter systemic injustices in their education workplaces, communities, and broader society.

Like most mainstream psychology courses, EP courses are often highly theoretical without an emphasis on using principles of learning toward SJ praxis (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2003). We present a visionary working model for intentionally designing and implementing EP courses to forward SJ, and provide an example of our emerging work toward this end. Though we focus on EP, the model has broader applicability as a praxis-centered model for teaching and learning, anchored in

principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Fuentes et al., 2021) and teaching for social justice (Dover, 2009).

Social justice is an elusive term with multiple definitions and context-based meanings. Borrowing from Bell (2016), we define social justice as both a process and end goal that results in “full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 26). Our use of the term “visionary working” acknowledges that: (1) social justice requires imagining and working toward an idealized just future (Bell, 2016); and (2) though our proposed model and course example may progress beyond many mainstream EP courses, we build on existing literature and support from colleagues, and are evolving in our understandings and visions of a truly “just” world and model

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of EP courses. To build the case for centering and normalizing SJ praxis in EP, first, we briefly review literature on EP, SJ education, and related DEI pedagogy. Second, we discuss how our positionalities helped shape the model and our course. Third, we share the model and a condensed syllabus showing how we applied aspects of the model in a case-study-focused engaged learning environment.

## Educational Psychology and Social Justice

As a whole, EP research and practice aim to examine and support student learning and development (Bird, 1999). Historically, however, the field has overemphasized theory and empiricism, with a canon dominated by a small number of predominantly White male scholars from Europe and the United States (Berliner, 1993). These expired approaches to thinking about learning and development continuously disseminate among the global majority<sup>1</sup> (Campbell-Stephens, 2020) despite their insufficiency for studying and remediating structural inequities in student learning and development worldwide (Begeny, 2018). For instance, the mainstream EP canon privileges individual cognition, “ability,” and motivation (Bird, 1999) while routinely ignoring impacts of oppression, consequent educational access constraints, and complex ecological processes on student development and opportunities to learn. As such, the realities of most EP courses are antithetical to SJ principles cited in the larger field of psychology as essential for research and practice (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012, 2017).

Given vast global inequities in education, EP courses can and should center the “work” of pursuing SJ (Schulze et al., 2017). In contrast to some psychology courses where students may not have personal experiences to connect with their learning (e.g., prior therapy as a clinical psychology student), all EP students have various educational experiences. As such, EP instructors are well positioned to leverage students’ own experiences to scaffold and accelerate their learning and SJ praxis. Instructors can help illuminate, deconstruct, and address the insidious ways injustice is perpetuated in their own and others’ lives. This possibility of using students’ experiences and knowledge to connect to injustices in education opens the door for practicing and modeling culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), applications of DEI, active learning strategies (Hartwell et al., 2017), and other pertinent pedagogies.

## Conceptually Incorporating Social Justice Through Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Curriculum

Pursuing SJ requires an EP paradigm shift, challenging traditional ways of teaching and learning such as the “banking” method (Freire, 1973). In this method, instructors ignore students’ experiential knowledge and lived experiences while emphasizing information regurgitation at the expense of

analysis, evaluation, and critique. An SJ approach requires curriculum and practices that support and nurture learners’ *conscientization*—the process of becoming aware of and critically thinking about the injustices, oppression, and inequities that exist in the world (Freire, 1973). While developing critical awareness has been identified as an important component of SJ education, learners must also develop skills and tools to address oppression that exists in their lives, communities, and larger society (Bell, 2016). Therefore, the ultimate goal of teaching EP for SJ is for all learners—students and instructors alike—to become more critically conscious, empowered, and *equipped* to address injustices in education and other realms through praxis: iterative, reflective integration of their consciousness into social action (Freire, 1973; Jemal, 2017).

A key strategy for moving toward SJ praxis in EP courses is using DEI levers to invite critical reflection and discourse around social injustices endemic to education, and injustices in broader society that have implications for education. DEI acknowledges the importance of both individual and group differences (e.g., race, ethnicity, language, gender identity) and strives to create equitable opportunities for historically underrepresented groups (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.). To prepare students to address the complexities of social injustice, it is insufficient to address diversity singularly (Fuentes & Shannon, 2016). In their article on DEI within psychology courses, Fuentes et al. (2021) suggest that “faculty may want to consider what aspects of the course will promote or address intercultural competence, inclusion, or the nuanced aspects of diversity” (p. 70). Applying intersectionality is one way to address the nuances of diversity, centering social (in)justice and oppression in complex ways while helping students to develop crucial interpersonal and intercultural awareness (Poindexter & Quina, 2019).

Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality to describe unique experiences created at the intersection of various identities, and to challenge the idea that these identities should be examined in isolation. As an example, in their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)<sup>2</sup> psychology course, Case and Lewis (2012) used intersectionality to increase students’ understandings of multiple identities, privileges, and oppressions in LGBT communities. They found that this intersectional approach benefited students of historically marginalized backgrounds, because it allowed them to grapple with the complexity of their own social identities while learning about other non-shared social identities. It also benefited students with historically privileged identities as they learned to deconstruct and challenge their own assumptions about LGBT communities. Therefore, applying intersectionality helped students to develop critical consciousness regarding LGBT injustices and allowed them to connect systems of oppression and privilege to their own social identities.

However, additional work is needed to help students move from theoretical understanding and consciousness to praxis. Likewise, instructors (including teaching assistants) should

continue to evolve their pedagogy in ways that model and demonstrate ongoing commitment to SJ praxis.

### **Instructional Strategies for Leveraging Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Social Justice in Educational Psychology Courses**

Integrating DEI into an EP course begins with the syllabus tone and content, constructed by instructors who have deeply reflected on their own positionality (Fuentes et al., 2021; Gurung & Galardi, 2021). For example, addressing mental health and having a warm-toned syllabus (Harnish & Bridges, 2011)—one which includes “positive or friendly language, sharing personal experiences, using humor, showing enthusiasm for the course, and conveying compassion” (Gurung & Galardi, 2021, p. 3)—may increase students’ sense of socioemotional safety and likelihood of contacting faculty and utilizing mental health resources when encountering personal challenges (Gurung & Galardi, 2021). Syllabi should also highlight DEI in the course description; include a separate diversity statement; cover issues and topics that practically address DEI challenges and issues in education; describe intentions to actively create an inclusive environment; and show a commitment to intersectionality (Fuentes et al., 2021).

It is also important that the philosophical foundations of EP courses shift to center DEI and SJ. This can be accomplished by introducing community psychology and other ecological, equity-based psychologies—versus more historically individualistic psychologies, such as cognitive—as the frame from which the course will proceed. Furthermore, concepts from mainstream EP can be reframed and critiqued from DEI and SJ perspectives. Watts (2004) examines how psychology concepts can be reimagined to incorporate SJ principles. For instance, they explain that mainstream EP concepts like self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) can be framed in a manner that illuminates empowerment—a key principle of community psychology (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004). Reframing mainstream psychological concepts and theories can help bridge knowledge from other courses and provide individuals with new constructs and language to address oppression.

Furthermore, Vaccaro (2019) argues that instructors should “acknowledge (and critique) psychological studies or theories that narrowly describe differences or behavior patterns for particular social identity groups without recognizing intersectionality and/or within-group differences” (p. 26). This includes providing students with works by a diverse group of scholars who propose culturally inclusive theories and frameworks, challenging deficit ways that marginalized social identity groups are often portrayed in curriculum materials—especially regarding learning and education more broadly.

In the following sections, we discuss our visionary working model and illustrate our approach to pursuing SJ praxis through an introductory postsecondary EP course. Before presenting the model and example, we share positionality

statements to reflect on our sociodemographic backgrounds, lived experiences, training, and teaching philosophies (Palmer, 1997 as cited in Bell et al., 2016). At the beginning of the course and in the syllabus, we shared many of these personal details with our students as a relationship-building strategy, and to model openness and vulnerability as part of the DEI and SJ praxis learning process (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). While co-planning lessons, we also discussed how our lived experiences shaped our lesson planning, overarching pedagogy, and responses to students. Indeed, we humbly acknowledge our histories and positions as lifelong learners and believe that the crux of the journey of pursuing SJ praxis is to recognize that we have not yet “arrived.”

### **Author Positionality Statements**

#### *Graduate Teaching Assistant*

My experiences as an undocumented, first-generation Latina student inspired me to become a teacher—specifically, to work toward increasing my students’ critical consciousness and transforming their understanding of science. My K-12 public education in a small rural town in California’s Central Valley did not reflect the various intersectionalities that impacted the educational experiences of my community, and until I entered graduate school, I was not expected to question or critically think about what we learned.

In the course described in this manuscript, my experiences informed a lesson on barriers and challenges that impact the learning and development of undocumented students; these resources are available in the Open Science Framework (OSF) materials accompanying this article (see Appendices A and B; Mustafaa & Nuñez Martinez, 2021). I encouraged our students to critically think through ways they could apply psychological theories to systemically address the challenges that undocumented students face in their education.

#### *Professor*

I am a Black woman (African American and Jamaican) from a working class background in urban Philadelphia, PA, where I observed a myriad of ills subjected upon predominantly Black low-income neighborhoods: lack of access to quality education and social services, over-policing, poor infrastructure, etc. My early critical consciousness was aided by my mother’s socialization and my curiosities about disparities between neighborhood schools and my diverse secondary magnet school downtown. My undergraduate psychology courses in the early 2000s rarely focused on SJ, offering little preparation for the diverse, multilingual middle school in a low-income, high-newcomer Miami, FL community where I taught after graduation. Prior to encountering critical scholars in my doctoral program, I encountered little SJ praxis in my education. These experiences motivate me to teach undergraduates to notice, unpack, and collaboratively

act on social injustices, as embodied in our model and manuscript.

## Conceptualizing the Visionary Working Model

In Figure 1 of [Mustafaa and Nuñez Martinez \(2021\)](#) OSF materials, we summarize our “Visionary Working Model for Pursuing Social Justice Praxis Through Educational Psychology Courses.” Considering [Dover’s \(2009\)](#) “Teaching for Social Justice” conceptual framework—which synthesizes core concepts from democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, culturally responsive education, and social justice education—Mustafaa framed the course with an understanding that she, Nuñez Martinez (graduate teaching assistant), and undergraduate students are all knowledge-contributing teachers and learners. Our model integrated this stance by focusing on contributions and desired learning outcomes for all parties. To construct the model, we posed the following questions:

What should students, graduate teaching assistants, and faculty ideally “look like” after engaging in a well-designed and implemented educational psychology course centered on social justice? That is, what knowledge bases, beliefs, and practices should they be prepared to engage and apply after participating in the course? (see Figure 1, [Mustafaa & Nuñez Martinez, 2021](#))

Using a theory-based logic modeling approach ([Donaldson, 2007](#)), we used the aforementioned literature and our experiential knowledge to begin outlining an idealized vision for SJ in EP teaching and learning. We identified inputs (people and course content), outputs (lesson plans), and short- (end-of-term) and long-term (life-long) outcomes for students, teaching assistants, and instructors. Then, using [Vaccaro’s \(2019\)](#) Framework for Teaching Multicultural Psychology (which builds on [Adams & Love, 2009](#)) as a foundation, we asked the following:

How might instructors utilize “[1] what students bring to the classroom, [2] what [we] bring to the classroom, [3] curriculum and resources, and [4] how [we] teach” ([Vaccaro, 2019](#), p. 23) to implement educational psychology courses that depart from the mainstream canon in favor of forwarding social justice? (see Figure 1, [Mustafaa & Nuñez Martinez, 2021](#))

Considering our focus on praxis and desire to embody principles of internationalization ([Begeny, 2018](#)) and SJ considerations for the global majority ([Campbell-Stephens, 2020](#)), we built on Adams and Love’s and Vaccaro’s frameworks in two ways. First, we added a fifth dimension, “Expected Praxis Outcomes” (see Figure 1, [Mustafaa & Nuñez Martinez, 2021](#)). Second, we articulated some of the ways in which schools/departments, institutions, communities, nations, and global communities can collectively build the context for generating SJ praxis among EP students and instructors alike.

## A Visionary Working Model for Pursuing Social Justice Praxis Through Educational Psychology Courses

Here, we briefly explain our literature and practice-based rationales for each model component as displayed in Figure 1 ([Mustafaa & Nuñez Martinez, 2021](#)). We also provide bulleted examples of how each component showed up in our EP course as pedagogical principles, lessons, and assignments.

### What Students Bring

We envision EP courses where students arrive prepared to critically engage with peers, instructors, and course content in ways that generate new ideas and commitments to SJ praxis. Such prior preparation would involve, for example, living in a nation and world where injustice is normatively despised. In addition, students would come from preK-12 schools and communities with policy contexts that supported decolonized preK-12 curricula; meaningful academic and social engagement with diverse peers; and exploration of their identities, privileges, and oppressions. Moreover, we imagine a day when—as a consequence of normative national, state/local community, institutional, and school/departamental efforts—instructors and students in EP courses (and the larger education institutions) are equitably diverse.

### What Instructors (Professors and Teaching Assistants) Bring

We envision EP courses where teaching assistants and professors are part of a global community of scholars who value, collaborate, and share resources across nations; decenter the U.S. and Eurocentric psychology canon; and center critical, liberatory psychologies of the global majority. In addition to having “What Students Bring,” instructors would have engaged in prior critical self-study, reflection, and action around their multiple identities and positionalities. They would also have prior training and experience with DEI, engaged pedagogy, and SJ praxis among demographically diverse peoples in various contexts.

### Curriculum and Resources

We envision EP courses in which global, national, state/local, institutional, and school/departamental contexts demonstrate commitments to SJ through targeted resources for innovative DEI praxis. We envision courses where every detail—from syllabus tone, policies, philosophy, expectations, to curriculum—center rather than marginalize DEI. Course curricula would also revolve around SJ praxis, including exposure to related professional education and career opportunities that intentionally forward SJ.

## How We Teach and Learn

We envision EP courses where principles of Teaching for Social Justice (Dover, 2009) are actualized through a non-hierarchical teaching-learning environment; all students and teaching assistants are viewed and included as knowledge generators and contributors (Gallor, 2017). Likewise, professors actively position themselves as co-learners and invite student knowledge and cultures into the learning space by applying active learning strategies and engaged pedagogy. Students have opportunities to reflect, share, learn, and demonstrate learning through multiple modalities that involve student choice (including some group assessments). Overall, teaching and learning are structured around praxis, where students and instructors collaborate on solution-based applications of theory and one's critical consciousness toward justice in education and societies.

## Expected Praxis Outcomes

We envision EP courses where all learners (students, teaching assistants, and professors) gain increased understanding of their own and each other's intersectional identities and positionalities in education spaces and the world. We expect that engaging all dimensions of the visionary model within a multi-layered support context (i.e., global, national, state/local community, institutional, school/departmental) would help increase conscientization for all learners, and increase knowledge, skills, and sense of empowerment to address social inequities, especially within education. Moreover, we expect that these outcomes would ultimately prepare learners to generate new knowledge and praxis that contribute to intergenerational liberation and healing from residual and ongoing systemic harms of past injustices.

## Teaching Introductory Educational Psychology: An Example of Integrating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Toward Social Justice Praxis

In Table 1 of Mustafaa and Nuñez Martinez (2021) OSF materials, we included a condensed version of our 10-week introductory EP syllabus, which is divided into four 2–3 week units, beginning with “The Ecology of Learning.” Here, we provide a brief walkthrough of Unit 1 to provide a sense of how the model elements are applied; other units proceed similarly. Unit 1 reframes learning away from the mainstream individualistic bend of EP (Bird, 1999) toward community psychology and ecological systems perspectives (Eccles & Roeser, 2010) and sets the foundation for ongoing illumination and deconstruction of the complex interplay of ecological factors and learning, including the roles of structural inequality and inequities. As an example of the “Ecology of Learning” unit theme, we focus on gender and gender identity and demonstrate how gender socialization and gender biases

in different contexts—microsystems (e.g., home, school) and macrosystems (e.g., cultures)—intersect and create opportunities or obstacles for equitable and inclusive learning.

At the beginning of the unit, we present a lecture and empirical articles, followed by a practice-based case study, “Gender Stereotypes: A Look Into the Early Childhood Classroom” (Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2017). Students are provided with small-group discussion questions to learn from, examine, critique, and plan to address social injustices as displayed in the case and group members' lived experiences. A whole-group discussion follows each small-group discussion, and student learning is assessed individually through a case study reflection. In addition, students are required to complete an online unit discussion board. Like case study reflections, discussion boards require students to connect theory to practice; however, the discussion boards require deeper engagement with theory, praxis, and peer-to-peer learning in a virtual discourse environment.

For instructors beginning the process of shifting toward a more SJ praxis-oriented EP course, we recommend selecting a case study from Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass' (2017) book for small and whole-group discussions, and using our case study reflection assignment. Doing so requires minimal effort and progresses beyond status quo lecture-focused EP courses. This approach “lends itself to authentic, active, and pragmatic applications of theory to . . . practices” (Sudzina, 1997, p. 199). Using case studies to address complex social injustices within an engaged teaching and learning environment has significant potential to empower and prepare learners to forward SJ. We gladly share our Unit 1 overview and Case Study Reflection and Discussion Board assessments in Appendix C (see Mustafaa & Nuñez Martinez, 2021).

## Conclusion

We crafted this working model as an opportunity to invite discourse around a specific course and sub-discipline in desperate need of a canon and teaching-learning overhaul: educational psychology. At the nexus of two fields rich in centuries of theory, practice, and critical perspectives, EP courses in the 21st century have no excuse for continuing to perpetuate whitestream theories and ways of studying teaching and learning that exclude the intellectual works and lived realities of injustice among the global majority. We assert the value of our model and course example as a stepping stone toward a DEI-focused educational toolbox. To do this, we expanded on Vaccaro's (2019) framework for teaching multicultural psychology by: (1) focusing on praxis outcomes; (2) integrating a global community emphasis; and (3) outlining the foundational multi-level support contexts needed to design and implement EP courses according to the model.

We invite others to expand, critique, and guide the model forward toward a new vision of EP theory and praxis centered on principles of DEI, SJ, and other perspectives that will continue to push our and others' learning, thinking, and

abilities to address pressing social issues. The model can be applied for course design within other similarly stagnant subdisciplines of psychology. We call not just to instructors and curriculum leaders but to other stakeholders in our global education and psychology communities to collectively engage in this necessary shift.

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### Notes

1. Campbell-Stephens (2020) defines “global majority” as: ... “a collective term that first and foremost speaks to and encourages those so-called, to think of themselves as belonging to the majority on planet earth. It refers to people who are Black, African, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and or, have been racialised as ‘ethnic minorities’. Globally these groups currently represent approximately eighty percent of the world’s population, making them the global majority now, and with current growth rates, notwithstanding the Covid-19 pandemic, they are set to remain so for the foreseeable future. Understanding that singular truth may shift the dial, it certainly should permanently disrupt and relocate the conversation on race.”
2. Consistent with Case and Lewis’ (2012) article, we use “LGBT” but acknowledge the more contemporary term, LGBTQIA+, to include questioning, intersex, asexual, and other identities.

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