Social Justice Leaders Serving Students of Color in Southwest Texas Rural Schools

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Citation: Niño, J. M., & Perez-Diaz, M. B. (2021). Social justice leaders serving students of color in Southwest Texas rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *37*(7), 80–93. https://doi.org/10.26209/jrre3707-09

The purpose of this study was to explore how social unrest in the United States, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic deaths of Black people at the hands of police, have transformed the leadership and pedagogy of school leaders in three rural school districts in southwest Texas. The strategies used to collect data for this study included semi-structured Zoom interviews, reflective journals, and class reflections. Findings from this study highlight how COVID-19 and racial unrest in the United States have centered the commitment of the participants to embrace a pedagogy that is more responsive to the students they serve. Additionally, current events have sensitized educators to be more empathetic toward the community they serve as educators. Implications of this study include that educators and leaders should become social justice advocates and strive to become allies against systemic oppression.

While in the decades since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) the United States has experienced many strides toward equality in schools, many issues still challenge schools across the nation. Historically, the U.S. educational system has been plagued by injustices and inequities masked by policies. From the beginning, racism has been engraved into the foundation of the United States. Racism has plagued school policies and established a "separate but equal" school system that has been superficially remedied to serve all students. Our nation is facing a dual pandemic—COVID-19 and racism—which has called on every educator to revisit their values, belief systems, and pedagogy to commit to a future very distinct from the past. The purpose of this study was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic killings of Black people at the hands of police have transformed the leadership and pedagogy of educators in three rural school districts in southwest Texas.

In early spring 2020, people across the globe faced the unprecedented crisis of COVID-19. This crisis had a magnitude like nothing people had encountered before, and no leader had prior experience to address this health crisis. Educational leaders across the globe found themselves in uncharted territory as they led their organizations through the pandemic. Specifically, the educational system had to pivot almost instantly and change how teaching and learning took place. Educational leaders had to develop practices and protocols which would allow learning to continue while simultaneously keeping everyone safe from the potential deadly harm of COVID-19.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States, racism was brought out of the shadows as crimes against people of color generated more interest in America. Antiracists, such as the activists of the Underground Railroad, Malcolm X, and Charlemae Hill Rollins, have fought racial oppression since the early days of the United States. In 2020, social unrest in response to racism in the police accountability system escalated. Breonna Taylor was killed on March 13, 2020, when police used a no-knock warrant to enter her home while she was sleeping and shot her eight times. On April 22, 2020, Vanessa Guillén, a 20-year-old U.S. Army soldier, was murdered by a fellow

The authors would like to thank Sarah Bluebonnet, doctoral research fellow, who helped us with this project. Also, we would like to thank all 25 social justice educators whose leadership and pedagogy are helping transform rural environments.

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This article is part of a special issue of JRRE that explores Black Lives Matter and rural education. Click here to see the full issue.

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Table 1
Texas Student Demographics, 2018–2019

	Number of students	Percentage of total (%)	Change from 2018 enrollment (%)
Race/ethnicity			
African American	685,775	12.6	0.7
American Indian	20,414	0.4	-0.8
Asian	242,657	4.5	3.0
Hispanic	2,854,590	52.6	0.9
Pacific Islander	8,271	0.2	3.1
White	1,490,299	27.4	-0.9
Two or more races	129,904	2.4	6.1
Total	**5,431,910**	**100.0**	**0.6**
SES and ELL status			
Economically disadvantaged	3,289,468	60.6	3.8
English learners	1,055,172	19.4	3.9

Note. Data from the Public Education Information Management System Information System (TEA, 2020).

soldier inside Fort Hood, Texas. On May 25, 2020, America saw a Black man, George Floyd, die while being arrested. Floyd's murder presented another case in which police actions illustrated a lack of accountability for police officers in violent acts against people of color,[1] leaving room for racism to prevail over the safety and well-being of people of color. This lack of accountability reminds many observers that all lives will not matter until Black lives matter. People of color in the United States worry about their safety from COVID-19. In tandem, they fear finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, at the hands of a racist police officer who is tasked with protecting and serving but can kill American citizens of color without consequence.

Communities of color have experienced higher rates of exposure to COVID-19 (Price-Haywood et al., 2020; Wilder, 2021). When combined with the constant reminder that American people of color are not safe from police violence, 2020–2021 became another time for solidarity against racial oppression and a critical moment in history to acknowledge the urgent need for change. The school districts included in this study serve marginalized populations, predominantly Latina/o/x[2] communities with high poverty rates and a low number of Black students. Interestingly, since Texas requires a subgroup to constitute a minimum of 10% of the population for accountability purposes, the leaders of each school in this study are left to serve students as they see fit. In this study, the Black student population falls below the 10% threshold, which offers flexibility for school districts in how they serve students. Unfortunately, this policy does not require interventions and support for students who identify with racial/ethnic groups with low populations.

Context

Texas Landscape

About 12.4 million children in the United States are enrolled in rural public schools (Schafft, 2016). Although one-fourth of public schools are labeled as rural, one-third of all schools and almost 60% of school districts are considered rural (Schafft, 2016). Texas hosts over 1,200 school districts and charter school systems (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2020). While Texas is responsible for educating more rural students than any other state in the country, not much attention is given to adequately serving these students. According to TEA, out of the 1,200 districts, only 55 districts have populations of over 25,000 students. Most districts are smaller and in rural communities. Table 1 illustrates recent student demographics in Texas.

Because of limited opportunities and underdevelopment, many rural areas have struggled with aging populations, poverty, outmigration, and contracting economies (Schafft, 2016; Woodrum, 2004). Despite these struggles, the school-

[1] Derek Chauvin has been sentenced to 22.5 years for the murder of George Floyd. We assert that the criminal sentencing for second degree homicide (intentionally or unintentionally killing another human being) is incommensurate with the harm caused by George Floyd's tragic death.

[2] Embracing an inclusive approach, "Latina/o/x" is used to highlight the spectrum of gender and sexual identity.

community relationship seems to remain strong and intact. Parents are more likely to attend school events and volunteer in school activities, and teachers report higher levels of job satisfaction and fewer behavioral problems than their urban counterparts (Schafft, 2016).

However, studies have shown that racial issues and racism within schools have prevented many Black parents from fully participating in their children's schooling experiences (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Myers, 2015). In addition, family support at home and in communities that differ from those of teachers (especially Black families and communities) is often unrecognized or unappreciated because educators do not accept or value it (López-Robertson et al., 2010; Myers, 2015; Sleeter, 2012). Educators must seek ways to understand the parents of their students better. Educators must recognize their biases, regardless of their race (Myers, 2015).

During the dual pandemic in which the United States has found itself, rural communities have experienced many challenges. For example, students had limited access to schools due to a lack of bus transportation, weak internet connections for online instruction, and limited access to healthcare (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2021; Tremmel et al., 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020). These and other conditions call for increased attention to rural and smaller school districts to better understand how America can equitably serve and educate all its children. This study focused on this matter within three rural areas in Texas.

Social Justice Leadership

Texas schools have experienced rapid demographic shifts that have altered school populations' cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic makeup. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders have faced new challenges in which the increasing diversity of school communities has become more complex and distinct. New threats to social justice have emerged due to this growing diversity, and historical issues of inequality continue to impede student learning, participation, and development (Chiu & Walker, 2007). Amid this revolution, many school leaders in these rapidly transitioning schools have implemented different leadership practices to address social justice issues.

U.S. Census data have revealed that the country's demographics are shifting. Specifically, Latina/o/x Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Americans of two or more races now comprise over 40% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021a). Census data also have indicated a 8.6% decline in the White American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021b). While students in U.S. public schools are becoming increasingly diverse, the teaching and administrative staff does not reflect this diversity and remains predominantly White (Bireda & Chait, 2011). The gap between the racial/ethnic identities of public-school educators and students represents a critical issue in U.S. education. As a result of the changes in the demographic profiles of school students, principals and teachers have faced unique challenges in the delivery of instruction, the language used with parents or community members, and methods of building an environment of authentic caring (Nieto, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). These rapidly changing demographics mean that school leaders need to prepare all educators to function effectively in a highly diverse environment. As Theoharis (2008) stated:

> Leaders espousing social justice ideals advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions. (p. 5)

Social justice leaders can promote equity and justice for all students by establishing school climates where discrimination is challenged and negated (Jayavant, 2016). American schools are continuously evolving in a complex social context of policies and mandates where marginalized groups are traditionally less successful. Consequently, students from high-risk backgrounds achieve minimal success in today's schools, where their self-esteem and confidence can be irrevocably damaged (Larson, 2010). Adams and associates (2007) wrote,

> The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p. 2)

Magdaleno (2016) suggested that school leaders need to be culturally responsive to diverse student needs to embed a culture of social justice and equity in schools. This literature shows how school leaders play an essential role in creating a safe and accepting school environment that guides the education of diverse student populations.

Embracing an equity lens for leadership preparation, Theoharis (2009) developed a seven-point framework for social justice leaders that specifically describes leadership in action. At the center of the framework is the social justice leader, who has two key tasks: acquire broad, reconceptualized consciousness/knowledge/skill base and possess core leadership traits (p. 13). The next level of the framework discusses how social justice leaders

challenge inequalities: by advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity; improving the core learning context (teaching and the curriculum); creating a climate of belonging; and raising student achievement (p. 14). The outermost layer of the framework is the resiliency the leaders develop to sustain themselves professionally and personally (p. 16).

Although the term *social justice* frequently appears in the education literature, it is often used as a "catchphrase without offering an explanation of its social, cultural, economic, and political significance" (North, 2006, p. 507). Several scholars have suggested that social justice is an "elusive construct" (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 3) and is not easy to define (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Theoharis, 2009). Shoho et al. (2005) noted that there is no agreement on the "definition of social justice with respect to educational administration" (p. 47).

Marshall and Oliva (2006) suggested that capacity building for social justice leaders requires a blending of theory, research, reflections on practice, tools for teaching and other interventions, strategies for engaging passion and emotion, and realistic engagement with the challenges in real-world policy and practice. Social justice advocacy has always been crucial in leadership preparation (Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Merchant et al., 2020; Niño & Alemán, 2019; Prieto & Niño, 2016). Moreover, with support in the current climate to change from a racist system to an antiracist policy-making system, building a better world beyond COVID-19 requires educational leaders to imagine new ways of thinking about education. As such, this study focused on how social justice leadership preparation for aspiring leaders influences their practice as educators during the current sociopolitical climate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods for Investigation

This inductive qualitative study explored the practices of educators from rural school districts in southwest Texas who are in a leadership development graduate program. As authors of this piece, we used a social justice lens (Theoharis, 2008) to help us answer our guiding research question: How did the phenomena of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement influence educators?

Although we do not identify as Black, we see the value in and need to embrace diversity and responsibility to create social justice and equity-oriented school leaders. For this reason, we invited 25 educators to share their insights from what they were living and experiencing in their current contexts. All 25 participants agreed to be part of this reflective experience. The participants were diverse. The majority of participants identified as female; 10 participants identified as male. Most participants identified as Latina/o/x; three women identified as White and two identified as Black, and two men identified as White and two as Black. While some of the educators served as classroom teachers, department chairs, instructional coaches, and athletic coaches, all were leaders in the movement for social justice in their schools. Table 2 provides participants' profiles. To establish confidentiality, we assigned pseudonyms to our participants and were careful not to provide too much identifying information. We grounded this study following Theoharis's (2008) approach to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic deaths of Blacks in the hands of police in America have influenced their thinking and practice as educators.

We began this study when participants were enrolled in our spring 2020 class. During this time, COVID-19 lockdowns began. We gathered data from participants from March 2020 through spring 2021. We collected data from all our participants using semi-structured Zoom discussions, reflections, and journal entries during the year-long journey. Most data were collected while participants were students in the graduate program, but we continued gathering data after graduation to avoid any conflicts and help them process the ongoing events in their lives after completing their graduate degrees.

Districts

Although we did not focus on particular practices of the districts in which participants worked, we share their districts' demographic information to describe the environments in which our participants were working and the students they were serving at the time of our study. Like many districts in southwest Texas, these three districts share similarities in terms of the students and communities they serve. While much focus has been given to urban school districts, the districts in this piece are among Texas's smaller and rural districts, which constitute the vast majority of school districts in the state (TEA, 2020).

District A has a population of 10,166 students. The student body is 97.2% Latina/o/x, 1.4% African American, 0.6% White, and 0.6% Asian American. District B has a population of 14,000 students, who are 97.8% Latina/o/x, 0.4% African American, and 1.5% White, with 0.1% students identifying as two or more races. District C serves 13,733 students. Its student population is 90.4% Latina/o/x, 3.5% African American, and 5.5% White. According to National Center for Education Statistics data (TEA, 2020), District A and B are considered rural distant, and District C is rural-fringe.

Positionality

We have collaborated with the participants as their instructors in their graduate program. During the two years of their studies, we have developed a unique and

Table 2
Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Identity	Race/ethnicity	Profession title
Bennie	Female	Latina	Instructional coach
Bobby	Male	Latino	Elementary teacher
Brandon	Male	Black	Secondary teacher/coach
Cindy	Female	Latinx	Elementary teacher
Dess	Female	Black	Secondary teacher
Dina	Female	White	Instructional Coach
Gracie	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Jackie	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Jesse	Male	Latinx	Secondary teacher
John	Male	White	Secondary teacher/coach
Leslie	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Luke	Male	Latinx	Secondary teacher
Maritza	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Mary	Female	White	Department chair
Mike	Male	Latino	Secondary teacher
Nancy	Female	White	Elementary teacher
Roger	Male	Latinx	Elementary teacher
Ronnie	Male	Latino	Secondary teacher
Rudy	Male	White	Elementary teacher
Sky	Female	Black	Elementary teacher
Sofia	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Sonya	Female	Latina	Secondary teacher
Suzie	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Tim	Male	Black	Athletic coach
Vicky	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher

authentic relationship with the participants in this study as facilitators during classes, but also as advisors, mentors, teachers, and learners. Embracing a reciprocal approach in the teaching and learning process, our collective approach of critical reflection invites our participants to interrogate the literature, practice, culture, and the system as opportunity for self-identity and liberation. Following Freire's (1970/1993) pedagogy, we dismantle the tradition hierarchy of knowledge where the instructors serve as master explicators and value the knowledge and space as belonging to everyone. Thus, part of the students' graduate program experience is to present their collective research at national academic conferences (Garza, 2020; Merchant et al., 2020; Merchant & Garza, 2015).

Our classes focus on preparing aspiring school leaders using a different approach to leadership development—a social justice advocacy curriculum. Through this curriculum, we attempt to create awareness of the many inequities found in U.S. school systems; racial tensions that occur in communities; and, most importantly, the responsibility of educators to nurture and embrace diversity. Our approach is centered on the notion that "activism for social justice is an attitude shaped by values, beliefs, and lived experiences. Social justice is about providing children with opportunities to become social justice advocates themselves" (Garza, 2020, p. 3). As a result, educators realize that most of the challenges we face in society are mere constructions of those who contribute to and perpetuate those ideologies. We

contend that future educational leaders must be prepared in a more equitable and critical approach to facilitate a process for change. In the same spirit, we gather as a collective for educators to see themselves in the children they serve.

Findings

In this space, we co-construct meaning from the data we collected and share the perspectives of our participants. We have organized the findings by themes, including *commitment to equity*, *inclusive pedagogy*, and *empathy for diversity.* These three themes are meaningful ways in which we share our relationship with the social unrest that our society faces within the dual pandemic of racism and COVID-19. We highlight the voices of our participants to generate vivid representation of the themes we identified through our data analysis.

Commitment to Equity

Our current social climate has brought about the need for educators to stop, slow down, and reflect on the values of society and the actions they should embrace to engage in an inclusive approach to education. Conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic have compelled educational leaders to analyze how they serve students and the community. Educators have realized it is not enough to teach students subject matter content, and they feel called to reevaluate their stance on the role of education to influence society.

Bobby shared how COVID-19 and recent tragic events have influenced his professional and personal outlook. He reflected in his journal,

> I believe there is no better time to reinvent educational leadership than the current pandemic era we are living through. If any good has come from these uncertain times it is the fact that we now know the world can change around us in an instant and that we as human beings and educators need each's collaboration to survive, adapt and prosper.

Similarly, Roger shared his new awakening, but he also recognized limitations within their reach as educators.

> I know my colleagues and I are capable and practice critical thinking and critical self-reflection. However, I feel we lack critical action. As teachers we are bound by the strict protocols of the system, and as bad as I would like to think outside the box, sometimes those efforts are thwarted by the administration due to the structured deliverables that make up a student's accountability.

Mike echoed the systemic challenges with which educators contend:

> The paradigms educators continue to live by can be changed, but it must happen in phases. Abrupt change is something the system is not built for and as fragile as the system is now due to the pandemic, we must tread lightly.

In a discussion, Suzie shared the factors that have contributed to her transformational process and solidified her grounding on social justice.

> Transformation occurs when people are placed in difficult situations, under extreme pressures, opposing forces, and internal and external struggles that ultimately result in the creation of something not new but evolved. This is how my evolution occurred in the journey of self-discovery, reflective dialogue, examination of pedagogy, and critical analysis of my core beliefs.

Luke acknowledged how his critical lens has surfaced as a result of the coursework and recent events in society. He said,

> I have chosen to be more vocal and to display signs of support in my classroom. There have been some subtle but noticeable reactions from some of the adults when they come into my classroom. The students have been more supportive and encouraging.

Luke's commitment to social justice in his classroom has been acknowledged by his students, but he also described how many of his colleagues find it difficult to participate in the discussions:

> I still see a reluctance for most educators on my campus to engage in meaningful discussions regarding race and social change. I push for it anyway. Students on the other hand seem to be more open to discussing and confronting injustices that they see.

Leslie shared her approach to calling her colleagues to action and becoming more collaborative. In her journal, she explained, "[I use] a more sensitive approach with my colleagues, I will be more mindful of creating opportunities

for discourse and collaboration." Jesse described using a similar strategy, engaging with recent events and the pandemic to share and inform others in his circle about the inequities some communities face. He stated,

> [I am] trying to come to terms and help friends and family come to terms with the woefully inadequate progress we have made as a society in even observing our basic Constitutional norms to be observed and enjoyed by all. And that's just step one.

Participant comments highlighted how recent events can serve as an opportunity to invite others to be part of the fight to end injustice in schools and communities. While trying to address needed changes, they have experienced how resistant adults can be in this process. In many instances, participants spoke of colleagues' resistance to acknowledging the need to embrace social movements in their classrooms. Many educators do not see the value as they are clouded by the accountability movement. However, centering on recent experiences refocuses the attention on those that have oftentimes been silenced and the stories that have been invalidated.

Inclusive Pedagogy

In response to the BLM movement and the disparities their students faced in instructional opportunities during the pandemic, many study participants indicated that they shifted their pedagogy to be more responsive to meet the needs of their students. For example, by understanding the power dynamics of educators as they recenter voice and agency, Mary shared in a reflection how recent events have influenced her positionality as an educator:

> As leaders of social justice, we must consider changing our ways of thinking about education. Some traditions we have are not helping us to develop and deliver better lessons and taking into consideration the vast diversity we have in our classrooms. We must learn how to incorporate the silenced voices and contributions of our people. I am always looking for new things to do online.

For Mary, education is not just about transmitting information to students based on old practices. Her commitment to equity invites her to become a learner herself and search for innovative ways to introduce new concepts to her students.

In a similar vein, Sky discussed how COVID-19 and recent events have influenced her teaching: "Current times are helping us transform into better leaders for social justice, because right now we are all working well together." In the spirit of working together, Ronnie's pedagogy has also been influenced by recent tragedies in our country. In a discussion he shared,

> The readings, reflections and discussions have removed the blinders and allowed me to see the real issues in social justice through eyes of my peers and professors. The summer events have changed who I am as a teacher. I am more opened minded, a better listener, and less judgmental of current issues.

Gracie described an inclusive teaching practice that welcomes the learning process using all approaches. She shared, "I like to make connections with my students' lives and ask them to share their personal experiences, and I am OK with them speaking in Spanish or verbalizing their responses." Using a common language to communicate effectively, she embraced students' native languages and incorporated them into her lessons.

Embracing technology has been a survival tool for educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Vicky modified and adapted her pedagogy to support students from different cultural backgrounds that textbooks and curricula did not acknowledge. She shared in a discussion,

> I let them turn in TikTok videos explaining and expressing what they know, and it was an interesting story. The students add their own pictures, music, and/or participation from their family members. I think too often we go into the school year with deficit thinking because we are constantly reminded of what our kids don't have instead of celebrating what they can bring into the classroom.

Another participant, Brandon, shared his experience of moving from Africa to the United States at a young age. He explained, "Although adjusting to life here in America was a piece of cake compared to the life I left behind in Africa, I was subjected to oppression, racism, and culture shocks." Brandon described using his experience of familiarizing himself with this country in working with students who come with international backgrounds. However, as a Black male in a predominately Latina/o/x community, he has experienced some professional doubts. He recalled the moment George Floyd was killed and reflected in his journal:

> The recent murder of unarmed Black man George Floyd became the tipping point that finally sparks weeks of protests not only in America but all the world. Yes, it is true that Americans finally had

> enough by taking the law into their hands to demand justices and equity, but the real frustration that compels these protests and lootings that you see in the streets throughout America emanating from the Black community and disenfranchised communities is that proverbial glass ceiling and the fact that it breeds a level of frustration that we can't even put into words.

Brandon continued,

> Time and time again in the past, I stood in front of my classroom door to pondering on what I have to do to prove that I belong to the teaching profession in the first place. How in the world am I always overlooked for promotion or recognition? How come it always happens for a certain race and somebody else whose skin color is different from mine. Why is it that as a Black man, I must work twice harder than anyone else or be twice as good to everyone else just to get half as much they get? Why is it that no matter what I do and how hard I work and how I go through the process in the terrain of everything somehow someway there's another excuse to ignore that criteria and instead bypassed it and make an exception to the rule for someone other than me? The rhetorical questions were endless.

For Brandon, recent events were constant reminders of the struggle men of color face in society and in the professional world as they try to advance. The tragic killings noted above and the subsequent social movement are evidence that people of color need to be recognized and heard. If not, they will take collective approaches in an attempt for transformation.

Dess shared the same concern as a Black woman. She described how she has become more proactive in reminding her colleagues at work to talk about issues of equity. She said, "I used to stay quiet so I wouldn't offend any of my White colleagues, but now I have allies in my Brown colleagues. They understand the experiences we face daily." Dess mentioned the importance of her allies' assistance in the fight against inequities.

Dina, a White woman, shared how she joined the protest over the summer as a sign of solidarity. She reflected on how the experience gave her a different perspective to better understand her brothers and sisters who were hurting.

> I have privileges that I will never be able to suspend because of how I look. I want for others to know that we are a community, we have experienced hate crimes in our backyards. We must do something to change it before it's too late.

Cindy reflected on her past experience and how the current climate influenced her professional role as an educator. She recalled that she was raised "to really care for all people," and that her parents "taught us to see others as our equals and that all people must to be treated the same way." This reflection has led her to pursue a career in education, where she can make a difference in the lives of children. She has adapted this mindset to better understand her students of color who do not look like her. The childhood sacrifices she has experienced in her life have influenced her empathy toward her Black students.

The current social unrest in the United States resulted in Rudy's recollection of a time when he almost died during a military exercise. As he was leading his troops through a swamp on a U.S. Army base, he was shot and had to be rushed to the hospital. "After that incident I realized that we could be taken at any time in our lives and to appreciate the time that we have with our families." Experiencing what a gunshot feels like and the thoughts that ran through his mind after being shot have influenced his approach to reaching his students. He remarked in a reflection, "I feel I have a responsibility to share my story with my students, especially the males of color given the shootings of people." He indicated that some administrators have asked him to refrain from bringing his field experiences into the classroom, but given recent events in the United States, he feels it is his obligation. Rudy shared how his experience of being shot brought awareness of recent deaths of Black citizens. It should be uncommon for a citizen to get shot by a police officer in a neighborhood. A soldier understands the challenges of war zones, but neighborhoods should be safe places where citizens find comfort.

Empathy for Diversity

Educators in this study shared how events during the pandemic have influenced their identity as educators. While most participants have seen themselves become more vocal and active in embracing social justice in their classroom, most have seen limited action in their schools. The participants called for critical conversations that will lead to transformation practices in their schools and communities they serve.

Sofia shared how the recent deaths of African Americans by police have had a huge impact on her profession but have done little to influence change in her school. She shared in a discussion,

> [The] BLM movement has challenged me to be a better advocate for myself. I began looking for ways to incorporate or include the matters of people of color in my practice to raise awareness and educate others. In my school district, I have seen administrative leadership take steps to address the movement. However, I have not seen much groundwork take place.

Tim, a Black man, described his frustration with society at large. He shared in class that every time he leaves his school to travel home, he is always fearful of being pulled over and thinking of the unimaginable. He shared how he has to talk with his own boys about how to behave so as not to create fear because they are Black. He also explained how he has become more vocal and visible in his school and community despite the pandemic. For example, he has reminded his school leaders to celebrate the contributions that people of color make to the community. He got emotional as he shared, "Being a Black male and seeing the struggle of other students who look like you is hard as well."

Sharing struggles and recognizing privileges have also influenced the teaching strategies of some participants in this study. For example, John reflected on his identity:

> If there is truly any good to come from the pandemic, it has to be the awakening of a new social and racial justice movement. I believe it has put in the spotlight the plight of those not to have been born in the same reference as many, being "White." I know these classes have made me stop and consider the privileges that my skin color has given to me, realized or not. While in no way believe that I should apologize for being born White, I have to acknowledge it. I have to use it as a transformative leader to push a new narrative. A narrative that for too long has been held down by many. If there is guilt for me, it is in not acknowledging that sooner. Simply being silent because it doesn't apply to me, is just wrong. Now, I voice and challenge the system with schooling practices.

Maritza also reflected on the difficulty of embracing new ways of practice:

> Our current events have forced us to have uncomfortable conversation, understand other perspectives and learn how the system is not equal for all. These are real-life experiences that will help us develop into transformative leaders for social and racial justice, and it starts in our classrooms and schools. I encounter some resistance, but I continue.

Using a similar approach, Jackie shared her thoughts on how much her school district is doing to bring current events to the educational environment. She said, "I feel that race continues to be ignored or colorblindness is still at the forefront. However, social change has allowed important conversation to take place that my have not otherwise." Her reflection addresses the idea that not much has changed, other than the discussions from classes where educators bring the issue of diversity to the forefront.

Discussion

Freire (1970/1993) stated, "Within history in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompletion" (p. 5). For many of our participants, building relationships served as a survival tool for themselves and provided a sense of human connection during COVID-19 and the BLM movement. Our findings suggest that "humans do not respond to the same stimuli in the same way across relationship contexts; indeed, the meaning of stimuli to the individual may change dramatically with changes in relationship context" (Reis et al., 2000, p. 844). The educators in this study have critically reflected on the need to engage with action beyond rhetoric. They have shared the call for transforming schools into communities for all students to create inclusive environments. Garza (2020) reminds us,

> Social justice is about much more than closing the achievement gap between White and Black, Latino, and other underserved children. Social justice is not about sympathy, feeling sorry, or shedding tears; it is not about lowering standards or expectations. Social justice is not only about facilitating access and knowledge; it is more about providing equitable opportunities for the children and families that have been historically underserved and marginalized. (p. 3)

Findings from this study advance Garza's (2020) notion of social justice, as participants shared that their commitment to equity was influenced by a desire to help the students in their school accomplish more than test scores. Participants articulated social justice pedagogy by welcoming all students' learning styles and becoming responsive to their language and emotional needs. Furthermore, because of limited resources in their communities, participants used all resources to commit themselves to embracing diversity within their schools and engaging in conversations and

practices that will continue to move toward a more equitable schooling experience for all students.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects have brought more urgency to understanding transformative thought for social and racial justice. The racial justice aspect has brought about something that we have all have felt before. Police brutality has always been an issue in our society. It has recently been a popular media topic due to the highly publicized killings of Black Americans at the hands of police officers who had a total disregard for human life. Through these tragedies, we have seen a rise in media support for the point that all lives will not matter until Black lives matter.

Using Theoharis's (2008) lens, we found that our participants could lead in education, the world faced COVID-19, with a practice and vision centered on race, class, and gender as to deeply affect historically marginalized communities. Participants in this study spoke about their commitment to equity, inclusive pedagogy, and empathy for diversity. Using an equity lens, participants in this study were able to center their practice on being critical of the system, which was not responding to the social needs of students. In their approach to enact social justice, many shared how they became more vocal to support their classroom. For example, Roger wrote in his reflection that he invited his colleagues to "think outside the box" for innovation. Similarly, Leslie shared how she used her social justice lens to collaborate with her colleagues to remove the lens of compliance for accountability metrics.

One of the driving forces in a social justice advocacy curriculum centers on Ladson-Billings's (1995) conceptual framework of culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) identified academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness as the three criteria necessary to accomplish the humanizing of schooling. Nearly 20 years later, as she revisited her work, the need to emphasize the malleability of culture continues to be present, especially as we face neoliberal policies which have established approaches to education that engage in culturally relevant practices in superficial ways (Sleeter, 2012). Participants in this study aligned their practice to the tenets of an inclusive pedagogy. Centering on social justice, participants reflected on how many changed their pedagogy in their environment. As Mary shared, "education is not just about banking information to students based on old practices." Rather, she included current events in her practice to incorporate ideas and voices unheard before. Gracie also described her inclusive practice of making connections with her students regardless of the language. Equally important, Brandon shared how recent events have given him motivation to speak about himself and others who look like him: "[I have] incorporated these conversations within staff meetings, evaluating policies and procedures currently in place, to implement trainings that are needed around diversity and inclusion."

The need is strong for educators to continue addressing social justice issues in today's complex society. An educator cannot simply identify as a social justice advocate but must be willing to fulfill this role through actions. A desire has been ignited within the participants in this study to shift from awareness to action as antiracist educators. Dess, for example, acknowledged how she has become more proactive in reminding her colleagues at work to talk about issues of equity. She shared, "As a Black woman, it has made me more confident to claim my space professionally and interject my opinion and leadership outside my program." In their school environments and small communities, traditional and conservative values are respected, which often impedes change and transformation. As Sofia remarked,

> I began looking for ways to incorporate or include the matters of people of color in my practice to raise awareness and educate others. In my school district, I have seen administrative leadership take steps to address the movement. However, I have not seen much groundwork take place.

Similarly, Jackie acknowledged the attempt her school district has made to bring current events to the educational environment: "I feel that race continues to be ignored or colorblindness is still at the forefront. However, social change has allowed important conversations to take place."

The voices of these educators remind school leaders not to blindly accept the norms and standards of practice as the only guiding framework. Scholars have suggested that such an approach of normalizing practice to standards is what hinders schools from moving forward (Sarason, 1982). As John reflected on his identity as a White man, "If there is truly any good to come from the pandemic, it has to be the awakening of a new social and racial justice movement."

Social justice leaders create inclusive environments within a school campus by taking action steps toward building community. Working toward allyship is how antiracist leaders can begin to dismantle supremacy in schools and make space for the whole community to feel safe within the school system. Antiracists are people who believe "White people have a responsibility to work with people of color to dismantle White supremacy and address historic inequities" (Mulholland, 2019). Antiracism begins with building self-awareness and education of White fragility, systemic racism, and the experiences of marginalized humans, intending to redistribute power from the hands of White folks to people of color (Williams, 2019). There are many actions that White people can take to grow from being advocates to working toward allyship.

Study participants shared how they attempt to embrace the challenges our nation faces in the midst of a pandemic. If we are not leading and acting with a critical consciousness mindset, we are not changing anything. Instead, we become the oppressors.

Conclusion

If the year 2020 taught us nothing else, we must take away that temporal and geographic context is everything. Whether that context means attending school as a youth of color during a global pandemic while having to navigate a racialized society that thrives on media depictions of dominant racial logics (Hancock, 2008; Mayorga-Gallo, 2019) or trying to make sense of the general criminalization of Blackness (Leonard & King, 2010), Americans have been faced with many challenges that have drawn attention to the pervasive systemic inequities that exist in our country.

In addition, the role public schools play in the delicate balance of infrastructures demonstrated unequal access to resources. Social movements received attention (#BLM), and racism, microaggressions, and many forms of discrimination were called out. People have actively chosen to speak out against injustices during these tense movements, while others have ignored them. For as long as the American public education system has existed, it has perpetuated cultural and racial hierarchies and racial microaggressions, creating a violent education space for our youth of color (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). However, staying silent in times of injustice is a privilege, which often translates as siding with the oppressor. The silence intensifies in smaller rural communities where diversity might be minimal. As such, this study reminds educators committed to social justice that not acting or speaking adds to the systemic oppression that people of color have endured they were first involuntarily brought to America in 1619. This movement calls for educators to enact with passion and conviction the transformation of environments for students who might not look like them. In doing so, they might disrupt comfort levels that have benefited the dominant racial or ethnic group, but deciding not to speak or act limits the possibilities for change in rural communities.

Now more than ever, sociopolitical consciousness among our youth is elevated, and educators must capitalize on their funds of knowledge (Golden, 2017; Subero et al., 2015) to provide a pathway for our youth to assert agency over their own education (Mayorga & Rosales, 2019; Shaw, 2016). This work begins with engaging in culturally sustaining pedagogical practices (Paris, 2012) that include introducing culturally relevant curriculum to all student populations, regardless of the racial/ethnic majority within student body. Education brings awareness, and educators play a pivotal role in infusing diversity in rural communities. These times have brought together people fighting against injustice and shined the light on those who want to maintain our system of White supremacy. In rural communities, educators, and social justice advocates have a responsibility to create a society shaped by the power of education. The humanistic approach of celebrating diversity in small and rural communities can facilitate recognizing and understanding diversity in our country.

In Texas, after a nearly six-year battle, in fall 2018, the State Board of Education (SBOE) approved the Mexican American Studies (MAS) elective course for high school credit. In fall 2019, following the review, approval, and adoption of the MAS course, the SBOE took up for consideration a second ethnic studies course for high school credit—an African American Studies (AAS) course. As a result of the foundation laid during the development of the MAS course, the AAS course was reviewed, approved, and adopted unanimously by the SBOE within six months. The introduction of ethnic studies courses represents a curriculum that pushes against Eurocentrism and racial hierarchies instead of focusing on historically marginalized and minoritized communities through historical context, contributions, and experiences. “Students will be able to have constructive discussions about equity and disparities, and find viable solutions to the malaise of the traditionally disempowered and minoritized in America” (Scott & Perez-Diaz, 2021, p. 226). While these courses serve only as electives, educational leaders need to commit to offering these courses as an issue of equity and access. Social justice leadership is not just for people of color.

Social justice leaders who do not identify as people of color can strive toward allyship to dismantle supremacist systems of oppression in schools. As educators and social justice leaders, we must be willing to advance, support, and promote the inclusion of all members of our communities. We can no longer rely on tokenism for advancing the issues of diversity and minorities. “True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce” (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 50). As well-informed and equitable leaders, embracing the MAS and AAS curricula in all schools and classrooms should be a priority for all educational leaders to know about the contributions that communities of color have added to our society. Furthermore, critical consciousness guides the thinking and leadership of educators as they cannot escape the realities of recognizing oppressive systems in schools and communities. This awakening encourages them to continue and expand the necessary changes for a more just society as they teach a class, lead a department meeting, or have conversations with parents in the community. The MAS and AAS curricula can facilitate opportunities to

recognize the many ways of knowing that students bring from their homes to their schools.

As social justice educators and leaders, we find ourselves in a privileged role to influence the political and social change we want. Considering the consequences, we contemplate the current pandemic and the deaths of people of color as a critical and pivotal moment in the story of our nation. Educators can build an understanding in our students by capitalizing on the richness of traditions, languages, and cultures that they bring to the learning environment every day. Educators and leaders need to emphasize the malleability of culture to be more present, especially as neoliberal policies have established new approaches to education. The passion for change heavily influences the advocacy for social justice in rural communities, and working together with school administrators and community leaders, we can begin the transformation. We can no longer stay silent. We must celebrate space and race.

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