



Beyond the Checkbox: Practical Social Justice Strategies in Kinesiology and Physical Education

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Beyond the Checkbox:

Practical Social Justice Strategies in Kinesiology and Physical Education

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KATHLEEN McCARTY , LAYNE CASE  AND
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The academic community has taken note of the recent unrest that arose due to the killing of unarmed Black people by police in the United States, namely, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and too many others. This is evident by the growing numbers of “allyship” and calls for immediate trainings that support marginalized communities. Despite these recent efforts, questions remain as to the sustainability and impact on higher education (Frank, 2018). This pattern of events, galvanized by racialized injustice, has unfolded before. Historically, it has been witnessed as a pendulum — injustice and harm done to minoritized communities is met with social surprise and immediate advocacy for change, followed by a gradual return to the status quo for the majority, namely, those in power. The pendulum swings back and the cycle repeats years later (e.g., consider the beating of Rodney King in 1991, the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the killing of George Floyd in 2020). Given the widespread, frequent and clear calls for diversity, equity and inclusion across higher education settings, there is a gap in action that indicates a repeat of the “return to normalcy” pendulum swing.

In the physical education (PE) literature, social justice has been described as an umbrella term for various culturally responsive and antiracist pedagogies that share the goal of preparing educators to “recognize, name, and combat” inequities toward marginalized groups (Spalding et al., 2010, p. 191). However, like the broader social pendulum swings, the field has seen cycles as scholars have advocated for socially just pedagogy in PE since the 1980s with little progress (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Kirk, 1986). As such, several goals exist within the social justice research agenda, including defining relevant teaching (Chubbuck, 2010), assessing teacher educator views and attitudes toward justice pedagogies (Burden et al., 2012; Walton-Fisette et al., 2018), and examining the effects of equitable teaching strategies for marginalized groups (Burden et al., 2012; Chubbuck, 2010; Walton-Fisette et al., 2018). Over time, this agenda has expanded to critique the lack of progress made in these areas, express the need to integrate the social justice agenda into PE curriculums, and attract those in the field to prioritize equity and diversity (Azzarito et al., 2017; Burden et al., 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2019; Frank, 2018; Tinning, 2002; Walton-Fisette et al., 2018). Despite this long history of critical scholarship in PE and related fields (e.g., kinesiology, exercise science), calls for practical change remain, with little attention given to offering practical solutions (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018).

The present authors similarly recognized the lack of a clear social justice agenda within graduate schooling and experienced a strong need to acknowledge injustices with the graduate cohort. There was a recognition regarding the lack of space dedicated to engaging in conversations surrounding the oppressive norms leading to marginalization (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia) and discomfort surrounding the limited or lack of acknowledgment of these issues. As graduate students in kinesiology, practitioners within the adapted physical activity/education field, and future scholars who work with diverse student populations, the authors unanimously agreed on the importance

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to act. This action included building an educational environment that acknowledged biases, called out problematic systems in education and laid a foundation for prioritizing anti-oppressive action as a necessary skill (herein referred using the umbrella term of *social justice*).

The purpose of this article is to share this recent action experience with other graduate students, faculty and practitioners in the PE and kinesiology fields and subdisciplines. The authors (1) present a brief summary on existing social justice training in PE and kinesiology that supports the need for further action and research and (2) provide a case study example of a graduate student–designed series of discussions in the Adapted Physical Activity (APA) graduate program at Oregon State University, including how individual and group behaviors during the process align with the transtheoretical model (TTM; Lee et al., 2021). By providing a public example of practical experience with prioritizing social justice in graduate training, this article will suggest strategies that go beyond merely a “checkbox” effort. As such, we strive to uplift the long-standing efforts of many others in the field, contribute to maintaining the current momentum in this area, and propel other PE and kinesiology professionals to take similar action that aligns with or advances the goals in their own academic structures.

Part I: Social Justice Education and Training Within PE and Kinesiology

As stated previously, advocacy and training for justice and inclusion in PE and kinesiology is not new. However, despite a growing body of literature, research outcomes have largely exposed a lack of understanding of sociocultural issues among teacher educators and, specifically, the application of associated teaching strategies in PE (Hill et al., 2018; Tinning, 2002). As a result, scholars have recently outlined practical strategies within PE and kinesiology curricula and training (Frank, 2018; Harrison & Clark, 2016; Landi et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2020). For instance, Lynch et al. (2020) and Landi et al. (2020) offered a two-part guide that demonstrates the “A–Zs” of social justice physical education, through which the authors outlined a variety of social justice elements to consider while teaching. When considering “Ability,” for example, the authors suggested that educators should explore how students *can* demonstrate that they are uniquely able to accomplish each task instead of categorizing students within the bounds of what they cannot accomplish. Moreover, for “Obesity,” educators should challenge sizeist assumptions and instead recognize that obesity is a construct that is not only based on a racist tool never meant to assess individuals (Bogin & Varela-Silva, 2013) but that a person’s weight journey is more nuanced in social factors than the traditional, individual-based “energy in/energy out” approach (Landi et al., 2020). Though additional resources will enhance practitioners’ understanding of how to engage in social justice pedagogy, these examples highlight the recent efforts to transition from describing broad concepts to *applying* practical strategies.

What Is Included in Social Justice Education? There is a wide variation in the teaching and integration of social justice concepts across physical education teacher education (PETE) and graduate student training in kinesiology (Breuing, 2011; Burden et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2018; Philpot, 2016). Even the term social justice is vague. For example, Burden et al. (2012) reported a range of strategies that PETE educators have used to enhance their PE teacher candidates’ understanding of justice pedagogy. Such strategies include emphasizing Don Hellison’s (1995) teaching personal and social responsibility through physical activity model, devoting class time for discussions of diversity and cultural sensitivity, and integrating various cultural norms into teaching practice. Other research reports that community service-learning, drawing attention to equitable learning over teaching students equally, and encouraging teacher candidates to reflect upon their own social

identities are all ways in which social justice has been considered within professional training (Hill et al., 2018; Walton-Fisette et al., 2018).

Despite this wide spectrum of learning experiences, there are also concerning reports that justice education is lacking or absent in PETE training (Burden et al., 2012; Walton-Fisette et al., 2018). Based on interviews that analyzed PETE faculty applications of social justice education, Burden et al. (2012) reported that all eight participants (seven White and one Hispanic) indicated that they often neglect covering social justice concepts in their PETE courses. This was based on reasons such as fears of doing so, lack of time or assumptions that other course instructors, particularly people of color, would cover that material. Walton-Fisette et al. (2018) similarly indicated lack of time as a primary challenge and noted that many PETE faculty left social justice out of the classroom altogether because of lack of content knowledge, resistance from students and concern for negative teaching evaluations. This wide range of reasoning that educators provide for limiting or excluding social justice in PETE curriculum is unacceptable and unfortunately speaks to the lack of space that existing education structures allow for minimizing harm and teaching about injustice. Moreover, the exclusion of social justice content is especially concerning when considering its potential to create a generation of teachers without the skills necessary to be culturally responsive to their students.

Who Is Responsible for Social Justice Education? The literature reports that administrators, teacher educators and program faculty are often responsible for equipping their students to use social justice pedagogy, despite lacking the training to do so (Ukpokodu, 2016; Walton-Fisette et al., 2018). Moreover, some evidence supports the trend in which members of marginalized communities, including students, are expected to articulate their own experiences to provide such education, often to their predominately White peers (Burden et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2021). To assume that a person understands socially just concepts simply because they are a member of an oppressed group and to rely on them for the “other” perspective is a gross violation by those in power. Further, limited recruitment of faculty and students of marginalized groups, such as Black, Indigenous, and people of color within kinesiology and PE fields (Hodge & Wiggins, 2010) exacerbates this tokenism. It is inappropriate to depend on one system (e.g., university), one learning experience (e.g., course) or one group (e.g., people of color) to be the sole source for social justice training (Burden et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2021). This is taxing, isolating and exploitive for people who are continuously tasked to uphold this, particularly on top of their typical responsibilities.

Relying on one particular person, group or course to provide perspectives other than those of those in power oversimplifies the complexity of social justice and leaves preservice teachers and practitioners underprepared (Burden et al., 2004, 2012; Lee et al., 2021). Lee and colleagues (2021) urged administrators to consider who is being asked to advocate for and teach about social justice and argued that supports should be created. One strategy to minimize this burden placed on educators is for students and faculty to instead seek and establish multiple opportunities for independent work in kinesiology and PETE that incorporates social justice education and awareness. This may also minimize any assumptions made by educators who are already in a space where they are willing to adopt perspectives for structural change. Therefore, the remainder of this article will provide a case study example of a graduate student-initiated and -designed introductory series of social justice conversations at Oregon State University that occurred within a department of current and future educators.

Part II: A Case Study of Our Graduate Program’s Summer Social Justice Series

Lee and colleagues (2021) introduced the concept of integrating social justice education into kinesiology as a behavior change process



that aligns with the TTM. Specifically, the authors described that educators can use the five stages of change within the TTM — precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance — as an overarching guide to meet students where they are regarding their level of sociocultural awareness and to design educational materials accordingly. As seen in the following paragraphs, this case study example has been mapped onto Lee et al.’s (2021) work to represent how our behaviors before, during and after the social justice series align with the stages of change. Of note, this article extends Lee et al.’s (2021) work by shifting the focus from implementing social justice for students to initiating self-guidance and understanding of social justice as the professional (e.g., teacher, graduate student, researcher). Table 1 presents a summary of social justice behavior change according to the TTM and examples of associated activities that students and faculty may engage in.

Precontemplation/Contemplation. In September 2019, the present authors, who each had interest in learning more about intersections of race, gender and other social constructs within their disability-focused scholarship on their own terms, opened this conversation to the rest of the graduate student cohort. Independently and individually, the authors met with professionals within the university to garner advice on topic structure and guided questions. To broaden perspectives, the authors consumed critical theoretical content, followed relevant influencers on social media (Duan, 2021; Singh, 2018), watched TED talks (e.g., Stella Young), and consumed content produced by individuals with disabilities (e.g., *Disability Visibility* [Wong, 2020], *Brilliant Imperfection* [Clare, 2017], *Skin, Tooth, and Bone* [Sins Invalid, 2017], *Crip Camp* [Newnham & LeBrecht, 2020], *Rising Phoenix* [Bonhôte & Etedgui, 2020]). Finally, the authors came together to strategize an approach after each individualized learning experience. After a single 50-min session with a group of fellow graduate students, dedicated to understanding personal identities and reflecting on how they might play a role in our work (Studylib.Net, n.d.), the authors continued to consider other topics to bring to the group.

Preparation. In June 2020, specifically following the social and political unrest addressed in the beginning of this article, the present authors expressed interest to each other in creating a platform for important, socially relevant conversations to the rest of the graduate student cohort. The authors reached out to faculty leaders for support in bringing these discussions into the cohort’s meetings, to which the faculty gave full support. In preparation, the authors informally surveyed the group about their familiarity with sociocultural issues, interest in social justice education and preferences for topics and discussion platforms. The authors also independently continued to engage in trainings offered at Oregon State University and held discussions with experts both internal and external to the university to brainstorm appropriate ways to have conversations with a beginner group of

Table 1.
Recommended Strategies for Engaging in Behavior Change for Social Justice by Stage of Change

Stage of Change	Description	Strategy	Recommended Activities
Precontemplation/contemplation	No or limited awareness of issue, not sure where to start	Scaffolded awareness Prioritize listening Self-evaluation	Reach out to providers on campus Critical disability theory readings Social media follows TED talks Disability-created content Social identity worksheets
Preparation	Decision to make a change in behavior, may have started some trial and error	Create a space Tangible application	Understanding level of knowledge (survey) Informal conversations Formal equity, diversity, inclusion trainings
Action	Engaging in changed behavior	Support continued growth	Open space in meetings for conversation Microaggression lecture and discussion Develop department-specific strategies
Maintenance	>6 months of engagement in changed behavior	Foster connections Make a plan (i.e., SMART goal)	Build discussion into meeting time Commitment to continued discussions Acknowledgment of roadblocks Continue/revisit contemplation activities Multiple champions

Note. Descriptions and associated strategies for each stage of change are adapted from Lee et al. (2021). SMART stands for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time frame.

graduate students with varying points of understanding and different backgrounds. Trainings included offerings from the Office of Faculty Affairs, the Office of Institutional Diversity, affiliates of the graduate employee union, and the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access. These specific offices are outlined as a starting point and to encourage readers to explore the offerings at their own university.

Action. Based on initial preparation efforts, the overall goal of the series was to create a space for graduate students and faculty to acknowledge implicit biases within their personal and professional lives and to discuss how to reduce the harmful effects they cause. The authors established four separate sessions that would allow for achievement of this goal. Topics were chosen based on feedback and direction provided by the specific graduate students within the cohort and included (1) introduction and opening space; (2) implicit bias and microaggressions; (3) microaggressions revisited; social justice in the classroom; and (4) integrating social justice within the curriculum. Each of these sessions was constructed using a variety of resources and facilitated by one of the authors (Dunn et al., 2014; Landi et al., 2020; Liberated Genius, 2018; Lynch et al., 2020; McInroy et al., 2019; Shanna Katz Kattari, 2020). More detailed information on each session is available upon request.

Maintenance. Just as with health behavior strategies, maintenance cannot be achieved without a continued commitment to a set plan and room for grace in setbacks that are likely to occur. The authors' department has committed to allowing space for further discussion and, as a result, behaviors that build upon the introductory social justice conversations have continued. For example, colleagues have since begun to ask more pointed questions on the intersectionality of research conducted and where individual biases may be affecting design and outcomes in research, teaching and service. Though the authors and department have a long way to go for a full paradigm shift, the collective has made some strides forward.

Strengths and Challenges. Considering this unique experience, the authors encountered several anecdotal benefits and proud

moments that support future action and continued behavior. This includes invitations from faculty to continue social justice dialogue in the upcoming terms; positive feedback and appreciation from individual students, both Black, Indigenous, and people of color and White, in the cohort; and unprompted initiations of meetings separate from those dedicated to social justice. In addition, post-workshop informal and anonymous survey responses from the group indicated increases in comfort level discussing injustice in our field. Importantly, other graduate students within the college became aware of these intra-departmental conversations and shared details about the series within their own group. This ultimately led to a direct invitation for the present authors to partake in a small-group conversation with a scholar who is nationally recognized for her work on racism as a public health issue.

Despite these benefits, it should be noted that the authors also encountered challenges. Motivating all graduate students to participate in the discussions or in a way that aligned with social justice was not easy. In addition, similar to challenges expressed in the literature, it was difficult to answer all of the questions regarding "how do we apply this?" Additionally, it was challenging to balance the overall desire to name a solution with an equally necessary deep breath to sit with uncomfortable biases and consider the impact that (in)actions have had within local communities. As scholars who are also continuing to learn, the authors approached these workshops as a co-learning space instead of establishing or assuming expert status. The authors believe there is no "right" solution or pathway to this balance other than to continue allowing both discussions to occur. Embarking on these conversations should be done with an assumption that there will be conflict, failures, disagreements and possibly risks to job standing/security. Just as an athlete learning a new skill, there must be an assumption of and strategy for roadblocks and learning curves on the journey to bettering. Even with these challenges, now that these conversations have been introduced, the authors feel more prepared and equipped to address some of those challenges moving forward.

Additional Considerations: Social Justice Education as a Behavior Change Process

Despite increased advocacy, social justice work is too often viewed as a single item to be checked off on a to-do list. As such, it is important to note that the discussions facilitated within the graduate program did not occur within a vacuum. They were initiated after months of dedicated self-education, outside dialogues, reflection and an intimate knowledge of higher education's shortcomings on these topics. The authors started by first working on educating themselves and finding like-minded colleagues to have critical conversations. With this, it is important to note that each individual must constantly be working through the stages on their own journey in order for the group's purpose to have sustainable success. The authors echo past calls from scholars that encourage PETE teacher educators and professionals to transition *themselves* from ethnocentric perspectives (Burden et al., 2012) and extend them to include those in related fields such as kinesiology, exercise science and sport studies. In addition, researchers have highlighted that, despite advocacy and integration of these concepts within education initiatives, there is a need for increased familiarization and understanding of practical solutions for social justice pedagogies among PE teachers and professionals (Flintoff, 2018; Lynch et al., 2020). Notably, the discussion of a variety of different mechanisms for bringing in information (e.g., practical and scholarly academic resources, social media, personal) and a variety of different topics within this article is not coincidental. It is important to uplift a range of opinions and topics to increase access for a larger, more diverse group of people and range of perspectives.

To engage in this work, scholars and educators must make a commitment to continued education throughout their lifetime and see the value of where it connects to their interests. In the field of adapted physical education and activity, for example, the importance of a universally designed curricula, or a strategy that fits all people to enhance learning, is prioritized (Kennedy & Yun, 2019). To include disability-focused strategies without considering the nuance of how disability can intersect with other identities, such as race or gender, in a compounding experience that is unique to each individual is a disservice to the people the field intends to serve. Although the authors' actions have subsequently led to seeking publication of this article, it was not the original intent to engage in this work for personal gain, and the conversations are only just beginning.

Expecting all students and faculty to accept social justice perspectives the first time they encounter them is ideal yet unrealistic; different activities should therefore be considered based on the awareness and preparedness of the students (Lee et al., 2021). For example, and within the TTM framing, sharing new facts, such as racial and cultural histories, is appropriate for individuals who are unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge social injustices (precontemplation), whereas connecting people to community-based activism groups is more appropriate for those who have been practicing this work for some time (action). Of particular note for appropriate strategies is a scaffolded list of anti-racist resources compiled by graduate students also embarking on social justice education (Stamborski et al., 2020).

Considering social justice education as a behavior change process, continuing to work through these stages, both individually and within the field, will likely not occur in a linear fashion. Notably, there is also no anticipation of reaching a "termination" stage within the TTM. The authors purposefully set out to facilitate these workshops as one way to co-collaborate with colleagues on a path to lifelong socially just ideals. As discussions on sociocultural issues, equity and justice continue and awareness grows, many participants in the case study have independently moved into new stages of behavior.



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Social Location and Researcher Positionality

The authors recognize that social justice education is a complex journey. With that, we acknowledge that the experience detailed herein may not be welcomed, or even allowed, at every institution. Moreover, some research indicates that equity and diversity trainings among university students can backfire (Dunn et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2021; Walton-Fisette et al., 2018). The authors also acknowledge that, as senior graduate students, there may be a power difference experienced that some newer graduate student readers may not share. Further, the authors' social location (Piepmeier et al., 2014) as two cisgender white women and a cisgender Black man has certainly not only influenced topic prioritization and perspective but could have influenced the department's willingness to open the space for discussion. It is also worth noting that the authors benefited from a university culture that prides itself on equity, diversity and inclusion efforts and faculty who deeply supported this series. Therefore, barriers toward initiating conversations on the problematic structures that exist within the department and field were limited. For those experiencing institutional barriers, reaching out slowly to develop a coalition of like-minded scholars, faculty and administrators where possible is suggested. It also may be helpful to connect with the university student union and make use of any campus resources to help build the case. The authors are grateful to Oregon State University and the APA graduate program for providing an environment in which it was felt that implementing these discussions were welcomed and would not jeopardize education or job status.

Conclusion

The value of infusing social justice into academic structures and student training, including within PETE and kinesiology, is clear (Brooks et al., 2013). The literature suggests that teachers who are culturally aware and use justice pedagogy are able to more effectively teach diverse student populations, empower their students and set students up to succeed in a system that may marginalize them and their communities (Harrison & Clark, 2016). With this case study example with practical resources added, the authors hope to add to a growing body of literature that allows for the adoption and sustainability of socially just perspectives within the field.

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