

Becoming inclusive: Developing pre-service teachers' orientations towards their practice in Scotland

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Abstract

This article presents findings, from a case study with a cohort of third-year undergraduate pre-service teachers (PSTs) in Scotland, regarding their ideas about inclusion and curricular justice, as they concurrently encountered practice and theory. Dawson's three lenses, infrastructure access, literacies and community acceptance based on Fraser's understanding of social justice provided a useful theoretical framework, through which to understand the strength of PSTs' orientations towards inclusion. Analysing responses to an online questionnaire ($n=99$) and interviews ($n=3$) we discuss how these findings inform our practices as teacher educators, to strengthen future PSTs' orientations towards justice. Although there is evidence of a greater understanding of the barriers to inclusion in education, there is a tendency towards weaker interpretations of inclusion. This article argues that, in order to support PSTs to develop critically informed approaches to inclusive curriculum making, teacher educators need to further engage them in reflexive practices; productive pedagogical approaches and debates grounded in what Fraser called a distribution-difference dilemma. The findings highlight the importance of critical reflection by teacher educators purporting to enact Social Justice Teacher Education.

KEYWORDS

curricular justice, inclusion, initial teacher education, pre-service teachers, social justice, teacher educators

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INTRODUCTION

Much literature has suggested that schools not only replicate disadvantages in society but also actively reproduce 'societal values, discourses and issues of unequal distribution of wealth, power and privilege' (Mills et al., 2022, p. 346). Curriculum making, as the social practices through which educators translate, design, mediate and enact their work is imbued with their cultural values, expectations, and representations (Priestley et al., 2021). Social Justice Teacher Education (SJTE) which aims to develop PST's understandings of inequities to bring change in schooling practices and broader society (Zeichner, 2011), acknowledges that any curriculum work, overt and hidden (Jackson, 1968), can shape the access disadvantaged and minoritised students have to rich educational experiences, key to developing as critical, ethical and creative citizens. SJTE is based on culturally responsive teaching (CRT). CRT draws on children's cultural knowledge, experiences, and ways of knowing to shape instruction and build classroom relationships (Gay, 2002), is affirming of diversity and sees the educator's role in actively ensuring access to the curriculum for all students (Zeichner, 2011).

In contrast, 'pedagogies of indifference' (Lingard, 2007) that ignore students' social, cultural and individual identities, by treating them all the same, can lead to the marginalisation of students who do not 'fit' into the dominant culture, reinforcing inequities in the education system. It is therefore imperative that teachers using a social justice lens, can, from the outset of their professional lives, question and challenge any current practices, which may exclude. Potential injustices, in terms of curricular justice, access to 'powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful' (Riddle et al., 2023, p. 142), and social justice, in terms of, redistribution, recognition, representation (Fraser, 2008) are thus key aspects to surface in initial teacher education (ITE), based on values of inclusive practice.

As such, a focus on inclusion in ITE is a vital part of efforts to interrupt PSTs' attitudes and beliefs to develop awareness, understanding and adoption of inclusive approaches to education. ITE programmes underpinned by strong orientations to equity, inclusion and justice can play a vital role in shaping PSTs' practices (Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022).

Teacher Education in Scotland, like many other countries, is based on professional standards. Zeichner (2003) suggests this professionalisation agenda regulating teacher education, and by implication teacher quality, has not stemmed the widening gaps in children's educational outcomes. Whilst, the General Teaching Council for Scotland's (GTCS) standards embed inclusion, encourage responses to pupil diversity that avoids marking some pupils as different and defines social justice as 'the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities now and in the future' (GTCS, 2021, p. 4), more nuanced understandings are needed if education and schooling practices are to be more fully inclusive. Hence, then the need for SJTE, which adopts more activist approaches (Zeichner, 2011).

The aim of this case study, located at a University in Scotland, was to explore third-year undergraduate PSTs' (Primary $n=70$; Secondary $n=70$) current ideas of inclusion and curricular justice, as they concurrently encountered practice and theory, and to draw on these to inform our practices as teacher educators to strengthen future PSTs' orientations and enacted practices towards social justice, in light of concerns regarding practical guidance and with explicit reference to social justice principles (Lim et al., 2019).

Two research questions were addressed:

1. What are PSTs' understandings of inclusion and social justice, before and after having studied a module on inclusion and attending a concurrent school placement?
2. To what extent do PSTs develop stronger orientations towards inclusion and social justice after encountering this concurrent approach.

This paper contributes to further explorations of the concepts of inclusion and SJTE and PSTs' understandings. We argue that in order to support PSTs to develop critically informed approaches to inclusive curriculum-making practices, we as teacher educators need to focus on stronger orientations towards inclusion in ITE through more intentional use of particular frameworks (for example, the Equity Compass) and pedagogical approaches (IPA, CRT). This article offers insights for teacher educators as we work with PSTs to bring about better-informed orientations towards inclusive curriculum-making practices and considerations with regard to the tension with the straddling of the theory/practice divide (White & Forgasz, 2016).

For the purposes of this paper, we locate, within the context of education, ideas of social justice and inclusion and the relationship to curricular justice. The empirical findings, generated from the questionnaire and interviews, are then presented and analysed drawing on Dawson's (2017) equity lenses' approach based on Fraser's (2009) redistributive, recognitive and representational social justice framework. Lastly, we discuss how we might reposition our teacher education programme and teaching to enable students to develop stronger orientations to inclusion which better support recognition of the often-hidden practices which can uphold structural and racial inequalities.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INCLUSION

Achievement gaps are currently a significant focus in many educational systems, including in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2025). Proposed strategies to achieve more socially just education systems, include the development of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) drawing on children's funds of knowledge (Moll, 2019), with the aim of creating inclusive environments for all. These approaches require different pedagogical practices, for example 'productive pedagogies' (Lingard & Keddie, 2013, p. 427) and may necessitate a reimagining of power relationships.

Ainscow's (2024) definition of inclusive education includes four key aspects: (a) inclusion as a process; (b) inclusion as the identification and removal of barriers; (c) inclusion as the presence, participation and achievement of all students; and (d) inclusion as a particular emphasis on those groups who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement. These ideas are supported by key literature in the field of inclusive education (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) and they are underpinned by the principles of equity and social justice.

Fraser suggests that justice means 'parity of participation' (Fraser, 2005, p. 16), which comprises three dimensions: 'redistribution, recognition and representation' (p. 6). Fraser (2008) argues that achieving social justice requires addressing economic inequalities (related to class, wealth, income and resources), cultural injustices (related to identity, gender, race, and other differences) and political injustices (related to voices being heard, 'social belonging') (Ibid., p.17). Initially, Fraser focussed on redistribution and recognition and explored how limited access to one or both dimensions can lead to a dilemma and be a cause of injustice. Of particular interest, here is Fraser's (1996) consideration of misrecognition. If misrecognition is based on a denial of 'the common humanity of some participants, the remedy is universalist recognition. In contrast, [if] misrecognition involves denying some participants' distinctiveness, the remedy *could* be recognition of difference' (p. 33). This distinction is important, as it allows for a recognition of the equal worth of all people, whilst acknowledging that there might be a need to consider differences due to people's distinctiveness to achieve 'parity of participation'. In terms of inclusivity, this is very relevant. Ainscow's (2024) principles above note 'inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers' and 'inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement'. Thus, here 'recognition of distinctiveness', and hence difference, is needed.

SJTE should attend to both relational and redistributive justice (Zeichner, 2011). Dawson's (2017) lenses provide a heuristic through which to consider the spectrum of inclusive thinking. Dawson's (2017) three concepts of infrastructure access, literacies, and community acceptance have informed our thinking about social justice and equity and how, by combining, in this way, these ideas of redistributive and relational social justice, we can think more deeply, and act upon concerns regarding inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, Dawson argues '[s]uch an approach requires a commitment to exploring beyond issues of access and participation (weak inclusion) to include questions of knowledge, representation, power, and cultural change (strong inclusion)' (Dawson, 2017, p. 540).

We agree with Ainscow's (2024) principles of inclusion but we argue that they are at risk of being orientated towards the weaker end of inclusive practice if all that occurs is access and participation. Our understanding of inclusion encompasses this and more thorny issues of whose knowledges are present, who is represented and recognised, who can mobilise power and what opportunities are there for cultural change, that is a challenge to the cultural norms which are enmeshed in schooling contexts, which keep in place structures that exclude and lead to curricular and social injustice.

CURRICULAR JUSTICE

School curriculum-making practices can account for children's differences in ways that may reduce intellectual challenge or depth (see for example, Shapira et al., 2023). Lingard and Keddie (2013) have argued that, whilst having classes where children feel cared for and nurtured is necessary, on its own it is not enough. If teaching and learning practices are not grounded in high expectations, pedagogies employed may not intellectually challenge children and so can fall short of addressing the three aspects [redistributive, recognitive and representational] of social justice. Instead, their research points to a '[...] need for pedagogies that scaffold from student funds of knowledge to high-status cultural capital and knowledge for students living in poverty, while also recognising and connecting with the non-dominant cultural knowledges of these and other marginalised students' (2013, p. 428).

Arguably then a focus on curricular justice attends to the issue of the apparent offer of distribution by enabling all children to access 'powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful' (Riddle et al., 2023, p. 142), through attending to issues of misrecognition and misrepresentation through connecting with children's lived experiences (recognition), in ways which they are included in the negotiation of this experience (representation).

Zipin (2009) notes how important redistributive and recognitive aspects of social justice are with regards to children's engagement and outcomes arguing 'if students are not meaningfully engaged they are not really 'there' in pedagogical interactions; and curriculum based largely on power-elite cultural capital, no matter how skilfully taught, tends to alienate cultural 'others' (Ibid., p. 318–319). Curricular justice is exemplified in ways where high expectations for all children are provided through curriculum-making practices orientated towards all three aspects of social justice: redistributive, recognitive and representative (Fraser, 2008). Teacher education, aligned to curricular justice, should support PSTs to notice, consider and rethink the cultural norms of schooling (Vass et al., 2024).

Consequently, there has been an emphasis on the content of ITE, for inclusion that influences PSTs' attitudes and understanding (Forlin et al., 2009). Some studies focus on PSTs' attitudes on inclusion before and after having attended a course (Beacham & Rouse, 2012) or a module focusing on disability (Killoran et al., 2014). A large amount of research addressing ITE is concerned with learning to teach from a social justice perspective (see, for example, Ayers et al., 1998; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Arshad et al., 2019; Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022). Ayers et al. (1998) discuss strategies for implementing a social justice framework in

teaching presenting examples of case studies and reflections from educators. Cochran-Smith (2004) suggests that fostering a commitment to SJTE should prioritise opportunities for engagement in reflective practices that challenge assumptions and biases.

In this study, we use Dawson's (2017) lenses to consider PSTs' reflections on issues of inclusion and curricular justice, to inform our future practices as teacher educators, through:

1. *infrastructure access* including, for example, physical access to buildings, children being able to access the classroom/curriculum through the assignment of resources, adoption of different practices and the extent to which children are considered and present in these decisions.
2. *literacies*, including the cultural norms that permeate curriculum making, the extent to which children need to fit in and whether PSTs recognise cultural hegemony and identify next steps; and
3. *community acceptance*, including the importance PSTs place on children feeling welcomed and belonging, how children are supported to do this and what affordances there are for understanding children's views of what is relevant and useful in the context of schooling, where rejection and disengagement from presenting curriculum-making practices is a possible and acceptable child response.

THE SCOTTISH CONTEXT

In Scotland, teachers are expected to acknowledge and be able to respond to the diversity in their classrooms. Legislation, educational policy and Teacher Professional Standards (GTCS, 2021) support this, for example the Education (Standards in Scotland's Schools, etc) (Scotland) Act 2000, which established the presumption of mainstreaming for all children, and the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (amended in 2009), which introduced the term 'additional support needs' (ASN), replacing the term 'special educational needs'. This acknowledges that all children and young people may have ASN during their school career.

To support the Professional Standards (GTCS, 2021), the National Framework for Inclusion (NFI) (SUIG, 2022) provides PSTs and teachers with an understanding of inclusive practice. The NFI is based on the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach (IPA) (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), which recognises and responds to children's diversity whilst respecting their dignity (Barrett et al., 2015). This social justice approach rejects the idea that some children are inherently less capable or that their differences are deficits that need to be "fixed." The IPA does not silence difference but values and recognises the importance of working with differences to promote acceptance, accessibility and representation potentially disrupting cultural hegemony (Lingard & Keddie, 2013).

Universities in Scotland offer different routes into teaching: four-year undergraduate programmes in primary and secondary teaching, and a one-year professional graduate diploma in education (PGDE). The approach to Teacher Education in Scotland is not to train in a multitude of techniques but to develop a disposition towards inclusive practice. ITE is the start of the professional development continuum and thus provides the foundations.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a 4-year undergraduate ITE programme. In the third-year undergraduate PST programme, a teaching placement experience (3 days per week) and university teaching (2 days per week) occur concurrently. The university taught module introduces the

key theoretical debates in inclusive education, examining the social and medical models of disability and other key themes such as prejudice and unconscious bias, antiracist education and social constructs of difference. The concurrent second school placement experience focuses on supporting the PSTs' development as an inclusive curriculum maker, and hence enables students to contextualise their theoretical studies about inclusion in relation to their emerging practice.

If theory and practice are inextricably bound, and the theories we use are often unconscious (Schön, 1979) and linked to our values and beliefs, there needs to be ways to trouble these. Hence, the focus on the third year of the PST programme as concurrent models can play a significant role in respect of developing PSTs' criticality, subject and pedagogical content knowledge and capacity to translate understandings into practice reflectively and reflexively (I-Anson & Jasper, 2021), troubling beliefs, assumptions and prejudicial thinking (Bolton, 2010). Reflection refers to the process of critically examining one's actions and experiences in order to improve practice. Reflexivity, by contrast, involves a deeper interrogation of how a teacher's own positionality, identity, and assumptions shape their interpretations and decisions (Bolton, 2010). Developing critical thinking about practices enables reflective and reflexive habits that can lead to meaningful change (Tripp, 1993).

The instrument used to obtain PSTs' views towards inclusive education and social justice was based on the questionnaire used by Beacham and Rouse (2012), further developed by a literature review focussed on inclusion and social justice. The first part of the questionnaire contained 18 statements and used a five-point Likert scale: '1' representing 'strongly disagree' (SD) and '5' representing 'strongly agree' (SA) (Appendix 1). The second part (Appendix 2) included questions about key terms such as equity, inclusion and social justice. The questionnaire was given twice, in the initial seminar and then in the final seminar of the module. The final seminar questionnaire, an online downloadable Microsoft form, included all the initial questions and had an additional question asking PSTs to reflect on how their views had changed. This reflection about inclusion and how research literature, their school practice placement, along with colleagues'/peers' discussions had interrupted their thinking, was intended to bring about a reflective space with the potential for them to question their assumptions with regards to inclusion and curricular justice. The final questionnaire also included a research information sheet and a consent form for those who voluntarily agreed to have their anonymous questionnaire as part of the research. Moreover, to minimise the influence of power dynamics on students' responses, interviews were conducted after the assignment-marking period. 140 PSTs attended the module, of which 99 (70.7%) consented to the use of their anonymous questionnaire in the research. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Scottish University.

Survey data in Excel file format was cleaned before analysis began. Initial analysis of data from Part 1 considered the response rate, the number of people under each response and changes to the initial and final responses (based on descriptive statistics and participants' comments). In Part 2, data were analysed using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the data familiarisation stage, data were coded and compared independently by researchers (to attend to accuracy and rigour) into initial themes and collated into broader themes. This process occurred multiple times as we gained a deeper understanding of the data.

Three individual interviews, each lasting 30–50 min with volunteer PSTs (two secondary and one primary) were conducted after the analysis of the questionnaire to offer a deeper understanding and further qualitative data about the reflections of PSTs. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and interview data were analysed in the same way as the questionnaire responses, using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The number of PSTs could be considered a limitation of this study; however, this is a case study of a cohort of student teachers at one institution in Scotland at a particular time.

In addition, we were mostly interested in their reflections and changes in their thinking, and how, by combining our current practice wisdom in this area and drawing more widely on research, we could interrupt and critically reflect on our current practices to inform our future practice as teacher educators to bring about stronger PSTs' orientations to justice.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the findings of PSTs' reflections on inclusion and inclusive education illustrate the importance they placed on their duty of care, the ethical (I-Anson & Jasper, 2021), relational dimension, and access and equal opportunities for all children. We discuss these below through the emergent themes: *how children feel, the same opportunities for everyone, mainstreaming, pedagogical approaches, and social justice*, whilst drawing attention to where PSTs thinking might have been developed.

How children feel

The findings indicate the importance PSTs ascribed to the way children should feel when included, stating that children should: feel welcomed, comfortable, seen and heard, supported and considered, valued; and feel they belong, are not excluded, and respected.

[...] children need to feel happy and comfortable in their environment, previously I never have much consideration to the social aspect outside of learning.
(Participant 54)

Some students noted that involvement in the module and placement experiences impacted their understandings of the range of barriers that children can face, although one noted other teachers and adults may not recognise these as being barriers to learning. They realised that the ASN label can put pupils 'in a box', deepening their appreciation how this might exclude and the potential conflict with acceptance by the community. Others suggested that talking with children about their teaching practices helped to ensure that marginalised groups felt included. One interviewee commented:

(the module) definitely made me [...] more aware of my actions and my words like how I would discuss things with students so that these children don't feel any discrimination or being excluded from any parts of my classroom.

These ideas above chime with Ainscow's (2024) thinking on inclusion, about the identification of children's needs and Dawson's (2017) lenses by attending to issues of access through curriculum resources and participation regardless of children's appearance, background, views and way of communication. The responses above illustrate both a weak community acceptance linked to the way teachers and schools can change their practices for students to feel welcome, and a stronger interpretation involving listening to pupils' views, therefore indicating the dual sense of the concept (Dawson, 2017).

Same opportunities for everyone

The PSTs' views that equal distribution of opportunities, including resources, is key to inclusive education was a common theme in both sets of data and changed little, though

some responses were more nuanced. One interviewee explained that, after the module and placement, she had a deeper understanding about the role of the teacher—not being only about the subject knowledge but also about ensuring physical accessibility. Other responses suggested that children should have the same support and guidance regardless of class, gender, race, ethnicity and disability. Whilst this view, which draws only on redistributive social justice, may be considered as fairness by PSTs, it raises questions. It can be discriminatory as it can ignore differences and the distinct needs of children, that is ‘recognition of distinctiveness’ (Fraser, 1996), leading to microinvalidations (Sue, 2010), potentially excluding individuals in less powerful positions, and therefore reinforcing rather than reducing inequalities.

The importance PSTs placed on access to the same resources was challenged by school placement experiences, which highlighted inequities in distribution between schools. One example given was the differential access to tablets—in some schools every child had one, in others there were none.

A different, less commonly seen, interpretation of fairness placed importance on inclusive education not just to cater for different needs but to better embrace different identities. These responses indicated that the module and placement experience helped students ‘see’ the issues surrounding socio-economic background, race, and disability (drawing on the recognitive aspect of social justice), and ways in which teachers can create inclusive environments.

Some PSTs spoke about the importance of curriculum making and how making the curriculum accessible for all children means adapting to teach about different cultures, linked to Dawson’s (2017) infrastructure access and literacies, although at a superficial level. One participant recognised the literacies that permeated curriculum making and commented that they no longer see inclusive education as a simple structure of considerations to make before each lesson but that it goes far deeper than that—affecting the classroom culture and beyond. Another participant, mentioning the placement experience directly, highlighted the challenges of inclusion in terms of enacting practices that do not isolate, label, and diminish the quality of educational experiences for children identified with ASN.

The comments above indicate how PSTs’ beliefs are shaped by both prior experiences and current interruptions through the module and placement experiences highlighting the importance of the link between theory and practice. This link challenges the ‘practice turn’ (Zeichner, 2012), which emerged internationally from claims about a theory-practice gap in teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016). The findings illustrate orientations to equality of access, and their reflections show how their thinking regarding the recognition of distinctiveness broadened in terms of issues of, for example, race and disability, and how this has made some of them question the culture represented in their classroom.

Mainstreaming

Whilst, above, we see that PSTs place importance on children’s feeling of belonging and equal distribution of opportunities, this did not translate to them believing that all children should attend the local ‘mainstream’ school. Over 50% (55) of the PSTs agreed in the initial seminar with the statement ‘some children are better educated outside mainstream schools’ and this percentage changed little over this concurrent teaching episode. One PST changed their view due to their placement experience in a different school, in a less affluent area, where they felt issues outside the school make it difficult to be inclusive. Five students’ views changed from agree to strongly agree, commenting

that the mainstream schools cannot offer the support that some children may need with one participant writing:

Some children struggle hugely in mainstream classroom settings and need a lot more support than other children, and this isn't something I feel they can get. Not only does it hinder their learning, but it impacts the learning of the rest of the class too.

(Participant 34)

This indicates some PSTs' understanding that inclusion is linked to distribution of resources. However, three students commented that all children, including those with additional support needs, can learn in the mainstream school:

Pupils should not be separated from mainstream schools but be given the opportunity to work in them effectively with additional support.

(Participant 39)

Teachers' responsibility for the learning of all children, as articulated by the IPA model (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), evoked a mixed response from PSTs when asked about whether 'children with additional support needs should be taught by specialists', with, over a third (36) being unsure and 28 agreeing or strongly agreeing.

These findings return to challenges regarding the responsibility of accessibility of the curriculum and of the assumed resources needed by children to access the school/classroom, indicating weaker orientations towards infrastructure access and hence inclusion, as PSTs see difficulties including all children in educational experiences.

Pedagogical approaches

The responses to pedagogical approaches, such as inclusive pedagogy and ability grouping, highlight PSTs' reflections on issues of access to curriculum-making practices and show thinking in terms of access to all (infrastructure access and community acceptance), cultural practices (literacies) and children's views (access/community acceptance/literacies).

Inclusive pedagogy

Some PSTs, when asked to consider the concept of inclusive education focused on pedagogy, differentiation and collaborative learning. Many referred to differentiated lessons, lessons for all, equitable approaches as ways to support inclusive practices but did not elaborate on their meanings. One, who spoke of their practice development, suggested,

[...] my understanding has developed in terms of how to practically implement inclusive practice (culturally relevant teaching, child-centred collaborative approaches) and create a classroom environment that is focused on the inclusion of every child rather than specific groups.

(Participant 57)

Twelve PSTs changed to strongly agree with the statement: *teachers should adapt teaching methods to the needs of pupils from diverse backgrounds*. One justified this change based on their own experience and practice in school, suggesting that this allows pupils to

actively engage in lessons, echoing Zipin's (2009) argument about engagement and cultural recognition above. Another commented that teachers should adapt their teaching for all and not solely focus on a small minority of pupils. However, one of the PSTs changed from strongly agree to agree commenting that whilst teaching methods should be adapted for some areas and lessons, "there needs to be a balance between supporting pupils from diverse backgrounds and those who are not from this background". This change suggests practices that might exclude, by appearing to uphold the potentially threatened prevailing cultural norms. This draws attention to the importance and challenge of Dawson's literacies lens when working as educators with the held beliefs of PSTs.

Moreover, there was a concern about teaching to the middle being detrimental to some children in terms of access and/or challenge. More unusually, a few responses indicated a shift in thinking away from 'fixing children through additional support' to removal of barriers that created in the inequities. This was very apparent in the increased number of PST's thinking about the lack of parity in children's educational experiences for children from less advantaged backgrounds compared with their middle-class peers.

The justification was generally rooted in their placement observations, noting that children from wealthier backgrounds had access to more opportunities outside of school and that these children accessed tutors when needed.

Over half of PSTs felt that these social inequalities were inevitable, but a few reported that, whilst recognising they exist, they are worth fighting to solve. Some recognised the importance of education but felt that the impact of poverty and society's present systems makes social inequalities inevitable.

Grouping by ability

Whilst explicit research (for example, Francis et al., 2019) highlighting the socio-economic discrimination evident in ability grouping was discussed with PSTs, a third still agreed or strongly agreed that children should be grouped by ability. Personal challenges with including all children in mixed ability classes had changed some PSTs' views from disagreeing to neither agree nor disagree. Reasons given included; the time taken to support different children who find learning difficult, taking more teacher support and some noted the growing 'gap' in ability in children as they get older, which confirmed their view that, in certain areas, most notably mathematics, children should be grouped. Children with ASN were mentioned as one group who were challenging to support.

However, some of the remaining two-thirds of PSTs drew attention to the module readings regarding the concern that ability grouping can be a form of labelling and shape teacher's expectations, potentially negatively impacting some children. Others spoke of grouping by ability creating a social hierarchy, which can impact children's confidence and their potentially differential access to knowledge.

A lot of the children in the lower ability groups often do not get challenged enough and are always given the most simplest version [...] I feel like they are not challenged as much as the higher ability groups.

(Participant 10)

This participant's thoughts about children's access to the curriculum, experiencing less challenging curriculum in lower ability groups, echoes research by Mills et al. (2022) which suggested that limiting children's access to knowledges and skills, such as critical thinking, key to quality educational experiences, amounts to curricular injustice rather than meeting children's needs. Ability grouping in schools keenly illustrates the research

and what some students supported, and practices that exclude: a conundrum of the theory/practice divide.

Social justice

Fair division of resources and opportunities and 'fighting' for it

Most PSTs' articulations of social justice included words such as 'same', 'equal' and 'fair'. These ideas of infrastructure access represented redistributive social justice; access to the same opportunities regardless of class, gender and ethnicity, equal rights, and also a fair division of resources and opportunities. Other PSTs referred to 'difference', speaking directly to community acceptance, suggesting that uniqueness is to be promoted, and people should not be encouraged to 'blend in'. Further to this, some suggested that social justice meant people not being excluded, and that environments should be welcoming and safe for all. Finally, some responses presented a more activist stance with regards to social justice, using words such as; 'fighting', 'breaking down', 'addressing' and 'overcoming' recognising the need to address systemic barriers and injustices faced by certain groups seeing social justice as taking a stance.

Teaching about social justice

Teaching about 'real world' social justice issues was important to most—as important as teaching numeracy and literacy. The majority of these PSTs did not think that Scotland's current school curriculum 'is an adequate and accurate representation of the views and interests of marginalised and minority groups'.

I went from 'disagree' to 'strongly disagree'. This is due to a multitude of factors such as studying cases, readings and real-life experiences of placement, where I have seen systemic injustices'.

(Participant 67)

Some responses reflected deepened understandings of social justice in terms of literacies and community acceptance. Stronger orientations to literacies included a questioning of one's positionality, recognising their own privilege, adopting a critical questioning stance to understanding what they know, why they think in that way and their subsequent curriculum-making practices. Community acceptance orientations included providing support and space for marginalised groups' views and concerns to be heard, challenging negative views and stereotypes when needed.

For example, one interviewee explained that through the module she became more aware of the debates about critical literacies and the decolonisation of the curriculum. One of the module readings about gender stereotypes, and more specifically bias towards boys in the classroom, made her realise that she always gravitates towards watching the boys in the class because 'stereotypically they're the ones that are always talking, swinging in their chairs, acting up'.

DISCUSSION

This article has focused on PSTs' thinking about inclusion and social justice as they encounter both practice and theory concurrently. Below we discuss our key findings using

Dawson's (2017) concepts to structure our thoughts and key arguments for teacher educators' practices to bring about stronger PSTs' orientations towards inclusion.

Stronger orientations towards inclusion

Infrastructure access

Concurrent experiences supported many PSTs to 'see' the range of curriculum-making barriers that children can face. PSTs linked inclusive education with involvement, participation and identification and removal of these barriers in line with some key aspects of Ainscow's (2024) definition. However, we found little evidence of realisation and acknowledgement of the complexity that exists regarding inclusion, suggesting limited understanding regarding the aspect of inclusion as a process (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

PSTs' responses illustrated weaker orientations towards infrastructure access based, for example, on lack of resources. Whilst their understanding of barriers to inclusion increased, the extent to which they are willing to adopt different practices and languages, which do not ask children to fit into existing structures, seems limited. Stronger orientations would include, apart from physical access, the recognition and power that students could have in shaping and negotiating curriculum-making practices (O'Reilly & O'Grady, 2024), drawing on all three aspects of social justice, something that we as teacher educators can scaffold through our practices.

Literacies

The findings show that learning from the module PSTs can better see different inequities (economic, gender, ethnicity etc.). There was a realisation that the curriculum does not represent minority and marginalised groups raising awareness that other factors may influence a child's learning and engagement. Recognitive justice that could disrupt the dominant social patterns which create unequal power structures (Fraser, 2008), are reflected in understandings of diversity and stereotyping, including ideas of misrecognition, and valuing non-dominant or marginalised cultures. However, only a very small number of PSTs recognised that their positionality, systemic injustices and current classroom culture need to be challenged to shift practices from children fitting into dominant cultural practices. This is consistent with similar findings in the literature (see for example, Cochran-Smith, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022; Rodriguez & Navarro-Camacho, 2023). This weaker literacies' orientation indicates a need for teacher educators to engage PSTs more with debates grounded in what Fraser (1995) called a distribution-difference dilemma, or in Dawson's terms, weaker and stronger interpretations of infrastructure access, literacies and community acceptance in ITE programmes, to support deeper critical consideration of pedagogical decisions that might unintentionally marginalise children (Mills & Lingard, 2022) and support better recognition that fairness does not mean sameness.

Community acceptance

Similar to other studies (Mouroutsou & Koskela, 2024), we found PSTs placed importance on children feeling a sense of belonging and safety in the classroom, but this argument was also used as a justification for different, potentially exclusionary practices, for example ability grouping and educating some children out of mainstream provision. Here, PSTs are positioned as 'insiders' and children as 'outsiders', and therefore rather than children being able to reject (as an 'insider' might) practices, they are at risk of being excluded. Dawson (2017) suggests

that a stronger form of community acceptance is thinking from both 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives, which could be seen through children's representation and a troubling of power relationships. This indicates a need for us, as teacher educators, to explicitly link PSTs to debates about inclusive, 'productive' pedagogical approaches (Lingard & Keddie, 2013), with ideas of 'pedagogies of indifference', which maintain systemic inequalities, in order that they can more critically reflect on pedagogies for social justice (Zeichner, 2011).

Furthermore, SJTE curriculum-making practices should foster PST's knowledge and beliefs that address issues of redistributive and relational social justice and evidenced through their verbal and enacted practices. Schooling in neoliberal times, with the emphasis on test scores and accountability inevitably shapes teachers' practices. As teacher educators, scaffolding PSTs engagement in critically reflective practices (Arday, 2019), including their own practice and wider policy agendas, can support PSTs to more explicitly question the practices in schools and challenge their own assumptions and biases from a critically informed socially just perspective. Providing alternative frames of reference could lead to an increase in possible reframings (Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022) available to PSTs as they transition into the teaching profession, potentially leading to different practices and educational possibilities. In this effort, inclusion of Archer et al.'s (2024) Equity Compass tool, which is based on redistributive and relational social justice, is one example of a practical tool (for PSTs, school community and teacher educators) to support SJTE.

Theory-practice tensions

Our findings show the challenges of positioning theory and practice experience. Strongly held beliefs rooted in cultural norms, for example grouping by ability, are difficult to reframe in terms of social justice, even in the light of evidence.

Placement experiences can expose students to the educational impact of unequal distribution of resources, and can provide moments of possible interruption to existing beliefs. However, focusing only on difference can reinforce inequalities in education, as the other characteristics or needs of a particular group may be ignored; for example, a focus only on resources, as some replies suggest, without addressing the recognition of diverse pupils' identities, may still lead to stigma and exclusion.

This research into our practices as teacher educators can be seen as one of the essential tasks, considered by Cochran-Smith et al. (2016), as we attend to processes of putting equity at the centre of our programme. Moreover, Cochran-Smith's et al. (2016) notion of 'patterns of practice for equity', which rejects the theory-practice binary, is useful for us as teacher educators as we continually grapple with, and shape our programmes, to interrupt, inform and develop possibilities for PSTs to understand the complexity of equity and attend to social injustices by practising and seeking to 'change the game' (Xenofontos et al., 2021). Supported sharing of both the National Framework for Inclusion (SUIG, 2022) and the Equity Compass tool (Archer et al., 2024) can encourage more active and reciprocal discussions between university teacher educators, school mentors and PSTs to help bridge this divide. This purposeful dialogue, using these frameworks, has opportunities, as Zeichner (2011) calls for, to inform our understandings as teacher educators of the work of schools and communities in bringing about justice, to support our education of PSTs.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight the importance of teaching for inclusion and social justice. There is the need for PSTs to be exposed and engaged more with the theories of social justice, and

debates such as these about powerful knowledge (Young & Muller, 2013) and about “funds of knowledge” (González et al., 2005). Intentional engagement with different frameworks (for example, Equity Compass, Fraser’s (1995) dilemma of difference and model of social justice) and pedagogical approaches (IPA, CRT) can offer structured guidance for thinking and addressing issues of exclusion, weak and strong inclusion.

Concurrent experiences in SJTE can interrupt thinking affording possible imaginings in becoming activist professionals and curriculum-makers, who are socially justice-minded and can develop their understanding and be concerned with social justice issues beyond their classrooms. For Cochran-Smith (2010, p. 457) teachers need to be “advocates and activists [who] call explicit attention to school and classroom injustices and work actively with their students, other teachers, parents, and community groups to pursue justice goals.”

Finally, we have shown how Dawson’s framework can help teacher educators better understand and develop PSTs’ orientation towards curricular justice through inclusive practices which supports ‘a rich, common curriculum that provides all young people with learning choices’ (Riddle et al., 2023, p. 137). It has long been recognised that education alone cannot change the wealth injustices and inequitable educational outcomes that consistently leave certain minorities disenfranchised and underserved. Colonialism and capitalism need to be challenged if there is to be a more equitably just society. However, to ensure that education then is not seen a hopeless task, as teacher educators, we need to ensure we link to both the local and global contexts, to show both the possibilities of education, whilst acknowledging the constraints (Zeichner, 2011).

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There are no known conflicts of interest or any financial interest or benefit that has arisen from this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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ETHICS STATEMENT

The research has been approved by the University of Stirling’s General University’s Ethics Panel: Ethics Reference Number: GUPE 2024 16756 13030.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire Part 1

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. All children can learn					
2. Children learn from each other					
3. Children should be grouped in school according to their ability					
4. Some children are better educated outside mainstream schools					
5. Schools can help to build an inclusive society					
6. Teachers should be responsible for the learning of all children in the classes they teach					
7. Children with additional support needs should be taught by specialists					
8. My job as a teacher is only to teach those children who want to learn					
9. Schools should be expected to teach children regardless of their background					
10. Education is a right that should be available to all children					
11. Teaching children who find learning difficult takes too much teacher time					
12. Schools can make a difference to children's lives					
13. Teachers should always create a learning environment that allows for alternative styles of learning					
14. Teachers should adapt teaching methods to the needs of pupils from diverse backgrounds					
15. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds typically have the same educational opportunities as their middle-class peers					
16. Social inequalities, like those based on class, gender, ethnicity etc., are inevitable					
17. Teaching about social justice issues is as important as teaching numeracy and literacy skills					
18. The school curriculum adequately and accurately represents the perspectives and interests of minority and marginalised groups in society					

APPENDIX 2

Questionnaire Part 2

Questions

What does equity mean to you now?

What does inclusion mean to you now?

What does inclusive education mean to you now?

What does social justice mean to you now?