Introduction to Special Issue


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We write this article during a time of national crisis, and this context cannot be ignored given the deeply entrenched structural and systemic racism in this country and its inextricable connection to social justice. Together, we have experienced the hardships of the global COVID-19 pandemic. However, it has impacted all of us in very different ways. It has magnified the already visible economic and racial health disparities in the US and given rise to increasing acts of bigotry, racism, white supremacy and xenophobia. At a time when the psychological, health and economic tolls of the global public health crisis still hovers over us as a dark cloud, our country witnessed the latest in a series of acts of police brutality, systemic racism and murder. We can no longer remain silent as a community. We can no longer act as if these issues do not directly impact our graduate students, our faculty, the PK-12 students, families and educators that we serve, and society writ large, especially Black individuals and other people of color. As a call to action to challenge anti-Black racism and advocate for an anti-racist stance in school psychology training programs, we (1st and 2nd authors) helped to draft the recent Trainers of School Psychologists (TSP) position statement (TSP, 2020) and are co-chairing (3rd author) the committee that is drafting the National Association of School Psychologists’ (NASP) anti-racism resolution. Similarly, a unified anti-racism statement and call to action was adopted by six of the leading school psychology organizations in June 2020. We, as trainers, need to serve as models for the values we are working to instill in the students that we train, not simply because it is the right thing to do, but because we also have an ethical imperative to do so. We would like this special issue to also serve as a call to action to trainers, specifically white faculty and faculty at predominately white institutions, in the field of school psychology. As trainers, we commit ourselves to innovation and excellence in school psychology graduate programs. It’s time to use our power, privilege, and voice as white individuals (1st and 3rd authors) to support our BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) colleagues and do more for racial and social justice at both the individual and systemic levels. To that end, below we share a brief history of social justice in our field, how the articles in the special issue advance the extant literature in school psychology and directions for future researchers. Finally, we share resources for trainers interested in beginning or deepening their anti-racist work at the individual- and/or program-level.

The purpose of this special issue is to provide a forum for researchers, practitioners, trainers, and graduate students to disseminate research studies that address social justice in school psychology across a variety of settings (e.g., graduate training programs, schools, community agencies), and have the potential to inform how pre-service and in-service training and professional development can better prepare school psychologists to engage as social justice change agents. Furthermore, the goal of this special issue is to develop resources to enhance trainers’ awareness and knowledge of how power, privilege, and oppression impact experiences and policies at the graduate level (i.e., curriculum development, student support, admission policies, research opportunities) and in school settings, and to improve their capacity to train students to engage in advocacy to address social justice issues in schools and the wider community.

Defining Social Justice

In 2017, the NASP’s Board of Directors identified social justice as one of the foundational pillars for all school psychologists and put forth the following discipline-specific definition (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], n.d.). Social justice is described as:

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Both a process and a goal that requires action. School psychologists work to ensure the protection of the educational rights, opportunities, and well-being of all children, especially those whose voices have been muted, identities obscured, or needs ignored. Social justice requires promoting non-discriminatory practices and the empowerment of families and communities. School psychologists enact social justice through culturally-responsive professional practice and advocacy to create schools, communities, and systems that ensure equity and fairness for all children and youth.

[Adopted by the NASP Board of Directors, April 2017] (NASP, n.d.).

This definition marks a critical step forward for our field; however, it should be noted that this definition is aspirational and assumes that professionals will practice in good faith. It is also important to acknowledge that this definition is not passive; it requires action on the part of the advocate.

Fleming (2018) argues that social justice requires “collective action and consciousness-raising” (p.21). This awareness is embedded in examining the social construction of power hierarchies, deconstructing binaries, and understanding the intersectionality of identities in either promoting or dismantling the status quo (Williams et al., 2019). In essence, any definition of social justice has equality at its core. Thus, social justice demands equal rights, opportunity and treatment to all who participate in society. Therefore, we argue that social justice has a direct connection to anti-Black racism, but also racism against people of color and other marginalized groups (e.g., LGBTQIA+; Cooper et al., 2014; Zeanah et al., 2020). Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality denotes the various ways in which race, gender, class and other social constructs interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s unique experiences with discrimination and systems of oppression. As social justice is increasingly recognized as a core value and practice within school psychology, it is imperative that researchers, trainers and practitioners examine various elements of applied social justice and training and utilize research-based approaches to promoting non-discriminatory and equitable practices. Hence, an in-depth examination of this topic has the potential to contribute to our overall understanding of social justice awareness and advocacy in school psychology training and practice. This knowledge would help to ensure that all children and youth are valued, and that their rights and opportunities are protected in schools and communities.

**Brief History**

Scholars have noted that the construct of social justice is not new to the fields that serve children such as education (Shoho et al., 2005) and psychology (Fouad et al., 2006); however, a resurgence of the topic has taken place in recent years (Graybill et al., 2017). Organizations such as the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the School Superintendents Association (SSA) have committed to a social justice agenda in varying degrees (AACU, 2002; Shriberg et al., in press). The two national organizations most associated with school psychology in the US – NASP and APA - have also expanded their commitment to social justice. For example, Division 16 (School Psychology) of APA created a Social Justice and Child Rights working group in 2010. As mentioned, NASP passed a definition of social justice in 2017. Shortly thereafter social justice was identified as one of NASP’s five strategic goals and a permanent Social Justice Committee was established (Malone & Proctor, 2019; Shriberg et al., in press).

In 2008, a special mini-topic issue of *School Psychology Review* (Power, 2008) featured two empirical studies (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; Shriberg et al., 2008), two commentaries (Nastasi, 2008; Rogers & O’Bryon, 2008), and an editorial note (Power, 2008) on social justice within school psychology. As the first collection of published articles to explicitly focus on social justice for school psychologists, these scholars provided much of the foundational and conceptual knowledge for our field. In his editorial note to the 2008 *School Psychology Review* special issue, Power (2008) noted the long history that school psychologists have had in advocating for and serving disenfranchised students, namely students with disabilities. However, scholars observed that most efforts to advocate for students from marginalized communities have focused on the individual, rather than the systems in which the child is developing (Power, 2008; Rogers & O’Bryon, 2008).
One area identified for future researchers to address was the role of systemic factors in marginalizing students, in addition to identifying effective system reforms aimed to promote social justice in schools (Power, 2008).

A special topic issue in the *Trainers’ Forum* in 2009 featured three full-length articles and an introduction to the special topic issue. In his introduction to the special topic issue, Shriberg (2009) focused on (a) why school psychologists are uniquely prepared to act as social justice advocates within schools and (b) the need for additional research about how to best embed social justice within school psychology graduate training programs in response to the growing interest around social justice in school psychology. He argued that the fundamental question facing trainers and researchers was how to transform the aspirational nature of social justice into effective practice in school psychology graduate education.

Since that time, social justice has received growing attention in the field of school psychology and the state of the social justice research is continuing to grow (Graybill et al., 2017), indicating a positive trend. However, the extant literature is largely conceptual and only a few empirical studies of social justice in school psychology training programs exist (Briggs et al., 2009; Li et al., 2009; Radliff et al., 2009; Miranda et al., 2014; Moy et al., 2014). In response to this need, TSP via its coverage of this topic in the *Trainers’ Forum* and TSP conference offerings has provided trainers with an opportunity to engage in professional development around issues of awareness and curricula and program development. An overwhelming response from the 2018 TSP conference indicated that trainers need additional resources and support as they train students to become social justice change agents. This first installment of our two-part special issue on social justice training in school psychology marks the 11-year anniversary of the original *Trainers’ Forum* special issue, and we are still grappling with the fundamental question of how to transform the aspirational nature of social justice into *effective practice* in school psychology graduate education (Shriberg, 2009). Although we characterize the social justice research as emerging, promising, and developing, we believe that these special issue articles represent the type of high-quality, impactful research that we need to sustain in this area moving forward.

**Overview of the Special Issue**

The five articles included in this special issue highlight important topics for preparing school psychologists to engage as social justice change agents during pre-service training (Broems & Jackson; Grapin; Bender et al.; Song et al.) and as practitioners (Moy et al.). Collectively, these articles address issues of social justice within school psychology across a variety of settings ranging from graduate training programs (Broems & Jackson; Grapin; Bender et al.; Song et al.) to local school (Moy et al.) and community-based settings (Song et al.). They also consider implications for research, training, and practice to advance a social justice agenda for trainers and trainees. The following briefly summarizes the focus and contributions of each of these articles.

In the first article, Broems and Jackson argue that examining white privilege represents a critical element in defining and evaluating social justice awareness, knowledge and skills. To that end, the researchers employed a phenomenological approach to explore conceptions of white privilege within a sample of white school psychology graduate students ($N = 13$) using semi-structured interviews. Qualitative analysis yielded 15 themes and 44 subthemes and the development of a framework summarizing how study participants conceptualized white privilege. This investigation elucidates how students’ development may occur as a result of exploring white privilege and offers recommendations for trainers of school psychologists.

In the second article, Grapin explains that traditional multicultural and social justice training has emphasized the development of awareness, knowledge, and skills related to promoting equitable learning environments. She argues that trainers need to go beyond these critical areas to include dispositions as an additional dimension of trainee competence. Grapin discusses the nature, measurement and development of trainee dispositions toward social justice in school psychology and summarizes research on training activities designed to foster social justice dispositions.

In the third article, Song and colleagues articulate
the need for additional research focused on how to develop a social justice professional identity among pre-service school psychologists. To that end, the researchers describe the development of a research-based, introductory-level graduate course that utilized experiential learning components, self-reflection and service learning to infuse social justice for pre-service school psychologists. Outcome data from students’ (N = 23) academic service-learning projects indicated that they perceived service learning favorably and that it positively influenced their learning outcomes. Additionally, findings revealed that the community-based partners perceived the service-learning relationship as helpful and useful.

In the fourth article, Bender and colleagues offer suggestions for how school psychology faculty can infuse social justice through coursework, field-based learning activities, and supportive mentorship. The authors describe the school psychology training sequence at the University of Massachusetts Boston, which is embedded within a college with a social justice mission, as a descriptive example of a programmatic commitment to social justice. The authors offer suggestions for school psychology trainers interested in developing and/or enhancing a social justice-focused training program in school psychology.

In the final article, Moy and colleagues argue that it is necessary to understand how work conditions created by potential workforce shortages for school psychologists have the potential to influence the practical application of social justice within school psychology. The researchers examined the experiences of a sample (N = 33) of school psychologists to examine work conditions, job satisfaction, and perceptions of work activities related to social justice. Participants were trained in a program with an explicit social justice orientation and were currently working in schools in a region characterized by a pronounced shortage of school psychologists. Results indicated that time constraints on the job and role limitations were perceived as barriers to engaging in social justice-focused work. Results also shed light on the relationships between school psychologists, colleagues and administrators. The authors make a compelling argument that if school psychology training programs work to cultivate a social justice orientation in their graduates, it is, then, critically important to better understand their experience as practitioners in order to adapt and meet the ongoing challenges of preparing future graduate students as agents of change in schools. Suggestions for how to incorporate training in leadership, collaboration, and team-building are offered by the authors.

**Key Themes and Findings across Articles**

Social justice pedagogy requires an understanding of self before advocating for those whose voices have been muted by systems of oppression (Williams & Conyers, 2016). This body of literature argues that individuals’ consciousness-raising is developed by examining several core principles. Among these principles are examining power, privilege (i.e., race, ethnic, class, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression), oppression, racism (i.e., individual, cultural and institutionalized), microaggressions, bias (i.e., implicit and explicit) and intersectionality. Hence, social justice requires the collective desire and ability to carefully examine the history of oppression and its denied access to resources for groups who have been historically and systematically oppressed. The articles in this issue examine many of these concepts. From a trainer’s perspective, the authors grapple with the most optimal way to create learning communities to foster this examination. In particular, given the discrepancies between the composition of practitioners and PK-12 students served, examining white trainees’ awareness of their understanding of “white privilege” provides insight into informing our curricular development (Broems & Jackson; this issue). Understanding how students encode, understand, and process this information can be helpful in creating learning opportunities to facilitate this process and help to dismantle systems of oppression.

Many of the articles in this special issue (Bender et al.; Song et al.; Moy et al.) also highlight university programs’ attempt to create opportunities to foster awareness. Whether this awareness involves integration within and across curriculum or the involvement in service-learning opportunities, the authors highlight novel ways in which programs may develop trainees’ awareness, knowledge and
skills. In moving the literature beyond developing these three areas, Grapin challenges us to focus on dispositions that enable trainees to be advocates. In doing so, this work builds upon the very limited scientific understanding of individual characteristics that may act as facilitators or barriers to the positive development of a social justice identity among graduate students in school psychology (Cooper et al., 2020).

A social justice lens requires action to interrupt oppressive systems and practices. While awareness, knowledge and skill development is paramount, it is also imperative for us to examine dispositions that may either enable or hamper trainees’ individual social justice advocacy, in addition to curriculum efforts aimed at the program level. This understanding of enabling dispositions can be helpful to trainers in creating individualized experiential opportunities to foster these actionable skill sets.

Although it appears that school psychology is practicing in a climate rife with social injustices, the history of America has always been one of oppression and marginalization (Fleming, 2018; Saad, 2020). Our current climate tends to magnify these injustices due to the proliferation of social media usage (Hill, 2018). For example, Teaching Tolerance, “a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center… founded in 1991 to prevent the growth of hate” (https://www.tolerance.org/about, para. p. 9) in its 2018 survey of K-12 practitioners documented a rise in hate crimes against groups who have been historically marginalized during and after the 2016 national election and campaign process. Findings indicated that these attacks were blatant and often perpetuated by adults who were charged with educating the K-12 population (Costello & Dillard, 2019). Hence, social justice practices need to examine the ecosystems that either supports or hinder this type of advocacy. Moy and colleagues (this issue) examine the ecosystemic barriers to engaging in social justice practices. They provide insights for trainers to integrate this perspective in the training of social justice practitioners. Overall, the articles provide concrete examples of developing awareness, knowledge and skills of trainees and practitioners. In addition, they extend our current practices by encouraging us to examine student dispositions and practitioners’ work environment as variables to foster social justice practices.

### Implications and Recommendations for Trainers and School Psychologists

After a period of being arguably a “fringe” topic in school psychology, we are in an era where social justice has gone mainstream. Not too many school psychologists--or school psychology trainers--are going to say that they are for social injustice. In this sense, to say that a school psychology program supports social justice is not a particularly bold statement as it once may have been. Saying that a program supports social justice is the easy part. Incorporating social justice principles into our programs in deep and meaningful ways and then evaluating whether this effort is having the desired impact on graduate students and the work that students, and later graduates, are doing is the hard part. Particularly given the lack of literature on social justice and school psychology graduate training, these five articles represent a significant step forward.

If social justice is both a process and a goal, then it is important to have research that speaks to both of these elements. The articles in this special issue highlight both how programs are working to conceptualize and put their social justice vision into practice (Bender et al.; Grapin) and ways that a social justice framework can lead to improved outcomes in practice (Song et al.; Moy et al.). We also were provided with an excellent window into how a subset of school psychology graduate students understand and seek to work against white privilege (Broems & Jackson.).

Moving forward, we need additional research in all of these areas. Despite abundant research attention (e.g., Israel, 2011) and, frankly, numerous obvious examples of white privilege that are present in virtually any school, there has been shockingly little attention paid to white privilege in the school psychology literature (Schumacher-Martinez & Proctor, 2020).

While models of social justice training are emerging, what research to date suggests is that these efforts are purposeful, and best actualized when involving the program faculty as a whole (Shriberg et al., 2017). In this sense, working to create meaningful social justice development among students involves going...
beyond critical reflection on things such as NASP and APA accreditation guidelines and thinking about where social justice training fits within these external parameters. It is not just the “what” but the “why” this work is important and what cultural blinders faculty might have individually and collectively that likely will lead to a coordinated effort (Shriberg et al., 2017). There is a growing amount of resources available for training programs to incorporate and this is a welcome development. But just as authentic school/family/community collaboration is not about having a series of disconnected events but rather reflects a genuine desire for engagement and reflection, so also will superficial attempts at covering social justice be inadequate.

Fortunately, there are several examples of faculty working together to develop social justice and multicultural training models in school psychology. Newell and colleagues (2010) identified seven faculty/program and student-level components to guide best practices for multicultural training grounded in evidence. Given the relationship between social justice, diversity, and culturally competent practice in school psychology (Shriberg et al., 2008), approaches to multicultural training (Newell et al., 2010) have been instrumental in shaping models of social justice training. For example, Miranda and colleagues (2014) identified foundational and dynamic components (i.e., program mission, diverse student body, program courses, community partnering, community-based projects and faculty modeling/research) for social justice training that were central to students’ development of cultural competency. Findings indicate that integrating a social justice framework into a school psychology training program can enhance students’ cultural competence and understanding of socially just practice. Moy et al. (2014) developed a similar model of social justice training for school psychology. This model also emphasizes institutional factors (i.e., program mission statement), faculty commitment, and partnerships with schools and community agencies that serve children. Furthermore, this model includes service-learning activities in addition to multicultural and social justice coursework and field-based experiences with diverse clients.

Moy and Ishmail (2020) surveyed school psychology programs to examine their use of research-based multicultural and social justice training strategies. Their findings indicate variability in faculty’s multicultural training and signal the need for more accountability and best practice guidelines for teaching multicultural school psychology. This study also highlights the important role that racial and ethnic minoritized faculty play in increasing access to multicultural coursework and research opportunities and in recruiting and supporting students from diverse backgrounds within the field. Further emphasizing the importance of diverse faculty voices, Williams et al. (2019) provide an example of a race-based faculty pedagogical model. This model takes a systematic approach and utilizes consultee-centered consultation in supporting faculty awareness of social injustices, curriculum skill development and ego support. Furthermore, as Grapin (2017) and Williams et al. (2018) highlight, we can draw upon the consultation and collaboration literature, particularly the organizational consultation literature, in guiding these efforts. Taken as a whole, these studies represent positive steps forward, but indicate that much work remains to be done. While social justice may be a relatively novel focus of attention for school psychology faculty, if the faculty are truly engaged and thinking critically about themselves as cultural and social justice agents, organizational principles likely hold much promise as a way of actualizing curriculum goals related to social justice.

Finally, Moy et al. speak to the ever-present teaching challenge of balancing the aspirational nature of social justice and the real-world realities of practice. Do we teach the way the world is at present, or the way that it could be if school psychologists achieve their potential as social justice advocates? Ironically, there can be a danger if social justice teaching comes off as too theoretical or ivory-tower; that is, if it is not rooted in the real world experienced by school psychologists. Thus, there is a need for more research that speaks directly to this dynamic.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Our current climate demands us to train practitioners who are socially and culturally conscious to interrupt all systems of oppression. We must commit to intentional learning and reflection and examine how to create instructional contexts that allow faculty and
students to engage in these difficult, yet necessary conversations. We, as trainers, can no longer remain silent to practices sanctioned by the state (i.e., police brutality, intimidation of communities of color by ICE agents) that continue to create trauma in communities already oppressed (Williams & Chiriani, 2019). As such, programs need to be proactive and intentional in their training to provide opportunities for trainees to use their understanding of privilege to interrupt oppressive systems.

It has been argued that social justice can become a crutch; a convenient way for progressives/liberals to state their support on a superficial level without getting their hands dirty (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). With this in mind, we want this commentary and special issue to serve as a call to action for each of us to do more than we did yesterday. We (1st and 3rd authors) believe that white allies, advocates and activists need to move beyond the politically correct “social justice” label and embrace being anti-racist; it is no longer enough to be a “non-racist”. Latham Thomas (n.d.) coined the term “optical allyhood” to describe “allyship that only serves at the surface level to platform the ‘ally,’ it makes a statement but does not go beneath the surface and is not aimed at breaking away from the systems of power that oppress.” The time is up for “optical allies.” The time for white advocates to act is now. In doing so, we must remember that efforts only focused at the individual level, will not help to dismantle structural and systemic racism. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Racism still occupies the throne of our nation” (Gendler et al., 1968, p. 16) As trainers, we must commit or renew our commitment to being actively anti-racist in all aspects of our lives, but particularly as it relates to dismantling white supremacy and systems of power that oppress within higher education and school settings. Only then, can we truly begin the work of diversifying the field of school psychology and effectively training future generations of school psychologists.

Future research in social justice needs to further examine dispositions that help to cultivate individuals to be upstanders, advocates and activists, and the intersections between dispositions and ecological variables in the promotion of social justice advocacy. Another area for future research is exploring the differences between school psychology students trained in social justice and anti-racist pedagogy compared to their peers, including their professional behaviors in practice-based settings. Greater understanding of facilitators and barriers of social justice activism and advocacy in school settings is also warranted.

**Resources**

**Websites**

NASP ([https://www.nasponline.org/](https://www.nasponline.org/))


National Museum of African American History & Culture ([https://nmaahc.si.edu/](https://nmaahc.si.edu/))

Being Antiracists ([https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist](https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist))

Southern Poverty Law Center ([https://www.splcenter.org](https://www.splcenter.org))

Teaching Tolerance ([https://www.tolerance.org](https://www.tolerance.org))

Trainers of School Psychologists ([https://tsp.wildapricot.org/](https://tsp.wildapricot.org/))

Race and Diversity Resources ([https://tsp.wildapricot.org/Race-&-Diversity](https://tsp.wildapricot.org/Race-&-Diversity))

**Books**


**Position Statements**


References


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