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Learning To See: Teacher Trainees' Journeys through Social Justice Challenges in School Observations

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ABSTRACT

Social injustice in education remains a deeply entrenched issue, rooted in systemic inequalities and structural biases. This study investigates how teacher trainees perceive and navigate social justice challenges during structured school observations, with a focus on their professional growth and critical reflection. Using a convenience sample of 65 trainees drawn from a single teacher education institution, a mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating structured observation templates, narrative accounts, reflective journals, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal recurring themes, including socioeconomic disparities, racial and ethnic discrimination, gender-based inequities, language barriers, and disability-related challenges in classroom settings. Trainees reported a range of emotional responses, from frustration and discomfort to empathy and empowerment, as they critically examined inequities in resource distribution, pedagogical practices, and student interactions. Their reflections underscore the importance of bridging theory and practice, cultivating empathy, and fostering agency to confront injustice in educational contexts. This study highlights the potential of school observations to enhance social justice awareness among future educators, while also identifying gaps in trainees' capacity to recognise less visible forms of exclusion, particularly disability-related exclusion. It advocates for the integration of critical reflection tools in teacher education programmes, the promotion of mentorship opportunities, and institutional support for addressing systemic inequities. Ultimately, the research contributes to the evolving discourse on Social Justice in Teacher Education (SJTE), emphasising the role of experiential learning in preparing socially conscious educators committed to equity and inclusion. As the sample was drawn from a single institution using non-probability sampling, findings are context-specific and are not intended to generalise beyond similar teacher education settings.

Keywords: School Observations, Educational Inequities, Critical Reflection, Social Justice Awareness, Experiential Learning, Inclusive Pedagogy, Professional Development of Teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Social injustice in education is a pervasive and complex issue with deep historical, structural, and systemic roots. It encompasses a wide range of inequalities and disparities that prevent certain groups of students from accessing quality education and realising their full potential.

The concept of social injustice in education extends beyond individual experiences of discrimination. It is fundamentally linked to broader societal issues such as economic inequality and systemic bias, and the legacy of historical segregation and exclusion continues to shape educational outcomes for marginalised communities today.

One of the most significant manifestations of social injustice in education is the unequal distribution of resources. Schools in low-income areas often lack essential materials, technology, and even basic facilities, putting students at a severe disadvantage. This resource gap is closely tied to socioeconomic divides, as students from low-income backgrounds often have limited access to quality teachers, extracurricular activities, and other educational opportunities crucial to academic success.

The impact of these inequalities is far-reaching and cyclical. When students from marginalised backgrounds are denied equal educational opportunities, they are more likely to face economic hardships later in life, perpetuating cycles of poverty

and limiting social mobility. This not only affects individuals but entire communities, hindering economic development and social progress on a broader scale.

Furthermore, social injustice in education manifests in various forms of discrimination and bias, including gender-based bias in teaching practices and disciplinary actions, as well as barriers to higher education for students from marginalised communities. Such systemic barriers often prevent talented students from accessing advanced courses, college preparatory programmes, and, ultimately, higher education opportunities.

Addressing social injustice in education is crucial for creating a more equitable and just society. Education is widely regarded as a pivotal tool in addressing social injustice, with the potential to foster tolerance, equality, and participation that can lead to a more secure and cohesive society. However, achieving this goal requires confronting deeply ingrained systemic issues and working towards comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of educational inequalities.

Recent scholarship emphasises the importance of critical multicultural education in promoting social justice. This approach encourages teachers and students to critically examine curricula, teaching practices, and social structures to identify and challenge inequities related to race, religion, disability, and gender. By fostering inclusive learning environments and promoting democratic decision-making, schools can prepare students to become active citizens capable of recognising and transforming oppressive environments.

Teacher trainees' observations in school settings play a crucial role in their professional development and preparation for future teaching careers. These observations provide opportunities for aspiring educators to gain practical insight into classroom dynamics, teaching methodologies, and student behaviour. Structured observation allows trainees to bridge theory and practice, develop critical reflection skills, gain exposure to diverse teaching environments, learn from experienced educators, identify areas for personal growth, build professional confidence, and deepen their understanding of learner needs and behaviour.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Hytten and Bettez (2011) highlight the need for genuine dialogue in social justice education to bridge diverse perspectives, acknowledge challenges, and navigate complexities. Rather than seeking consensus, they emphasise fostering connections and alliances to strengthen social justice efforts in schools and society, particularly amid declining institutional commitment. By characterising different strands within the social justice literature, they aim to enhance understanding, encourage sustained dialogue, and create opportunities for collaboration among educators with shared but varied goals.

Hosseini, Leijgraaf, Gaikhorst and Volman (2024), in a scoping review drawing on 60 empirical papers, examine how teacher educators and student teachers critically interrogate their pedagogical methods to model socially just practice. Consistent with Cochran-Smith's (2010) theoretical account of teacher education for social justice, they argue that Social Justice Teacher Education (SJTE) is not a fixed set of activities but an integration of justice-oriented principles across pedagogy, research, and practice. Rather than prescribing a single set of best practices, their review highlights the role of critical consciousness, contextual adaptation, and reflection in identifying inequality, disrupting hierarchy, and valuing diverse knowledge. SJTE, on this account, addresses injustice at both local and systemic levels, with educators continuously refining their practices and beliefs.

Şenbayrak and Ortaçtepe Hart (2024) examined an online conversation club designed to develop English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners' communicative skills and critical literacy through discussion of social justice issues traditionally treated as taboo or controversial in language classrooms. Drawing on demographic surveys, session recordings, facilitator field notes, reflective journals, and student interviews, their study identified discursive patterns in which learners framed environmental issues as a matter of collective or individual responsibility and framed immigration as primarily a matter of government responsibility. The findings point to the potential of social-justice-oriented conversation clubs to foster diverse perspectives and cultivate critical literacy in language classrooms.

Taken together, this literature establishes that social justice work in teacher education is understood less as a discrete curricular add-on and more as a disposition that must be cultivated through sustained dialogue, critical reflection, and structured practice. The present study extends this literature by examining how one specific practice-based mechanism — structured school observation — functions as a site for this cultivation among Indian teacher trainees, a context that is comparatively under-represented in the SJTE literature reviewed above.

METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data from structured observation templates and qualitative data from narrative accounts, reflective journals, and focus group discussions were collected concurrently and integrated at the interpretation stage. This design was chosen to allow the frequency and distribution of observed incidents to be read alongside the emotional and interpretive meaning that trainees attached to them.

B. Participants and Sampling

The study involved 65 teacher trainees enrolled in a teacher education programme at a single institution. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling strategy: all trainees engaged in the institution's scheduled school-observation placements during the study period were invited to participate, and 65 agreed. The trainees represented a range of subject specialisations and demographic backgrounds within this single institutional context. Because the sample was drawn from one institution using a non-probability method, the findings should be read as context-specific rather than statistically generalisable to teacher trainees elsewhere; this constraint is discussed further under Limitations.

C. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Trainees were briefed on the purpose of the study, and written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were assured that their observation notes, journal entries, and focus group contributions would be anonymised and used for research purposes only, and that non-participation would carry no academic consequence. Illustrative excerpts reported in this paper are attributed to anonymised participant codes (e.g., T-14) rather than to identifiable individuals or schools.

D. Data Collection Methods

The data collection process employed a multi-method approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the social justice challenges observed in school settings:

- Structured observations: Teacher trainees conducted structured observations during scheduled school visits, using a standardised observation protocol to ensure consistency in data collection across classroom settings.
- Researcher-designed template: A template was developed to guide trainees in recording specific instances of social justice-related incidents, including the type of incident, context, parties involved, and immediate outcome.
- Narrative accounts: Participants provided detailed narrative accounts of significant events or patterns they observed, generating rich qualitative data that captured the nuance of classroom interactions.
- Reflective journals: Trainees maintained reflective journals throughout the observation period, documenting their evolving perspectives on social justice and their personal and professional growth.
- Focus group discussions: Periodic focus group discussions were conducted with small groups of trainees, allowing for collaborative reflection and the emergence of collective insights not always captured in individual accounts.

E. Data Analysis Procedures

Data from the structured templates were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to identify the prevalence and distribution of observed incident types; these figures should be read as descriptive rather than inferential, given the sample and design. Narrative accounts, journal entries, and focus group transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Two researchers independently coded an initial subset of the qualitative data (20%) to develop and refine the coding framework; discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the agreed framework was then applied to the remaining data by a single coder. This step was intended to improve the consistency and trustworthiness of theme identification, though it falls short of a fully independent double-coding of the entire dataset, which is noted as a limitation below.

FINDINGS

This section presents the social justice challenges observed by teacher trainees during their school placements, drawing on the structured observation templates, narrative accounts, reflective journals, and focus group discussions described above. The results point to recurring systemic inequities — socioeconomic disparity, racial and ethnic discrimination, gender-based inequality, language barriers, and disability-related exclusion — and to the frequency, context, and emotional weight with which trainees encountered them.

Table 1: Frequency of Social Justice Challenges Observed by Teacher Trainees (N = 65)

Type of Social Justice Challenge	Frequency of Observation (n)	Percentage of Trainees (%)	Common Contexts Observed

Socioeconomic disparities	49	75%	Classroom activities, resource allocation, and field trips
Racial and ethnic discrimination	39	60%	Peer interactions, teacher responses, and classroom grouping
Gender-based inequalities	33	50%	Subject preference, teacher-student engagement
Language barriers	20	30%	Class discussions, participation, assessments
Disability-related issues	8	12%	Activity exclusion, lack of accommodations

Table 2: Emerging Themes from Critical Incidents Observed by Teacher Trainees

Theme	Sub-themes	Illustrative excerpt (paraphrased, participant-coded)	Emotional responses	Implications for practice
Socioeconomic inequities in learning	Unequal access to materials; differential treatment	T-14 noted that a student without a notebook was reprimanded while peers with materials received assistance.	Guilt, empathy, frustration	Equitable resource allocation; sensitivity training for teachers
Cultural and linguistic marginalisation	Language barriers; cultural mismatch	T-27 observed a child who spoke only in their home language being repeatedly told to stay quiet.	Sadness, confusion, awareness	Bilingual support; inclusive curriculum
Gender bias and stereotyping	Teacher bias; student expectations	T-08 recorded girls being discouraged from choosing science on the grounds that it was too difficult.	Anger, shock, motivation to advocate	Gender-sensitive pedagogies; role-model integration
Discrimination against students with disabilities	Lack of accommodation; exclusion from activities	T-33 described a student with a mobility impairment being excluded from a sports event without explanation.	Helplessness, discomfort, moral dilemma	Universal Design for Learning (UDL); inclusive-policy awareness
Implicit teacher bias	Unconscious favouritism; deficit thinking	T-19 reported that fair-skinned, fluent-speaking children received disproportionate praise.	Realisation, guilt, reflection	Reflective teaching practice; bias-awareness training
Resistance and agency in action	Speaking up; questioning norms	T-41 described asking a teacher why a quiet student was treated differently and being told it was not their concern.	Nervousness, pride, empowerment	Building student voice; safe reporting mechanisms

A. Types of Social Justice Challenges Observed

Analysis of the data collected by the 65 teacher trainees identified five recurring categories of social justice challenge in school settings: socioeconomic disparity in access to resources and opportunity; racial and ethnic discrimination in peer and teacher-student interaction; gender-based inequality in subject choice, participation, and discipline; language barriers affecting classroom participation and comprehension among non-native speakers; and disability-related exclusion arising from inadequate accommodation.

B. Frequency and Context of Observations

Socioeconomic disparity was the most frequently observed issue, recorded in approximately 75% of trainee reports, followed by racial and ethnic discrimination (60%), gender-based inequality (50%), language barriers (30%), and disability-related issues (12%). Most incidents were observed during regular classroom sessions, particularly group work and class discussion, though a meaningful proportion occurred in less structured settings such as the playground and extracurricular activities. Trainees also noted disparities in how teachers allocated attention and feedback across students, and some observations pointed to systemic issues embedded in school-level policies, such as tracking or disciplinary procedures.

C. Teacher Trainees' Reactions and Reflections

Trainees' written reflections showed a consistent pattern of emotional response — shock, sadness, frustration, and in some cases a sense of helplessness when confronting deeply embedded systemic issues, alongside motivation to address these challenges in their own future classrooms. Reflective journals frequently recorded trainees questioning their own assumptions and biases, and several trainees explicitly connected specific classroom incidents to theoretical concepts encountered in their coursework, suggesting an emerging capacity to move from description toward critical interpretation. Some trainees proposed concrete strategies for their future practice, including diversifying curriculum materials, adopting culturally responsive teaching approaches, and creating structured opportunities to discuss social justice issues with students. Journals also converged on a shared call for continued professional development in this area, with several trainees specifically citing mentorship and collaboration with experienced teachers as necessary supports.

Table 3: Summary of Key Learning Outcomes from Critical Incident Reflections

Learning outcome	Evidence from narratives	Recommendation
Heightened social justice awareness	Most trainees described an emotional turning point after witnessing an incident of injustice	Embed critical reflection tools in the teacher education curriculum
Development of critical consciousness	Trainees began identifying systemic patterns rather than isolated incidents	Incorporate sociological lenses into pedagogy modules
Enhanced empathy and perspective-taking	Strong emotional resonance with the experiences of marginalised students	Use structured storytelling and lived-experience narratives in training
Emerging agency and voice	Some trainees reported questioning or intervening in unjust practices	Encourage ethical decision-making discussions and role-play exercises
Need for institutional support	Feelings of helplessness and uncertainty about how to respond	Establish mentorship programmes and clear protocols for addressing injustice

DISCUSSION

Read together, the frequency data in Table 1 and the thematic data in Table 2 suggest a pattern worth interpreting rather than simply restating: trainees' attention tracked visibility. Socioeconomic disparity and racial or ethnic discrimination, both of which tend to surface in overt, episodic classroom moments, were noticed far more often than disability-related exclusion, which more frequently takes the form of a routine omission — a student not being asked, an activity not being adapted — rather than a discrete, nameable event. This distinction between event-based and pattern-based injustice is not addressed directly in the findings above, but it offers one explanation for why disability-related issues were reported in only 12% of observations despite being, by definition, structurally embedded in classroom routines. It suggests that trainees' capacity to notice injustice may currently be better calibrated to incidents than to omissions, which has a direct implication for how observation protocols are designed: a template built around discrete 'incidents' may itself under-elicit reporting of exclusion that has no single triggering moment.

A second pattern concerns the relationship between emotional response and critical consciousness. Trainees did not describe observation as a neutral, technical exercise; guilt, empathy, frustration, and helplessness recurred throughout the journals. Taken alone, this could be read simply as evidence that the placements were affecting. The more specific claim supported by the data is narrower: emotional response and interpretive movement co-occurred in the same journal entries,

with trainees who described strong affective reactions also more often describing incidents as instances of a broader pattern rather than as one-off events. This co-occurrence does not establish that the emotional response caused the shift toward pattern-level thinking, but it is consistent with the view, developed elsewhere in the SJTE literature, that social justice learning is as much an affective as a cognitive process.

Third, the coexistence of growing critical consciousness with reported helplessness points to a specific design gap rather than a general one. Trainees were, on this evidence, reasonably able to notice inequity and increasingly able to interpret it as systemic; what the data suggest they lacked was a structured next step — a protocol for what to do once an inequity had been identified during a placement in which the trainee held no institutional authority. This distinction matters for practice: it suggests the intervention needed is not more exposure to injustice, which trainees have already encountered frequently, but scaffolded guidance on ethical response within the constraints of a trainee's actual role.

These interpretations should be read against the limitations of the design. Because the sample was drawn from a single institution, it is not possible to determine whether the observed pattern — visible inequities noticed more readily than embedded ones — reflects something general about novice observers or something specific to the placements, curriculum, or regional context of this particular programme.

LIMITATIONS

- Single-institution, non-probability sample: All 65 trainees were drawn from one teacher education college using convenience sampling, which limits the generalisability of both the frequency data and the thematic findings beyond similar institutional contexts.
- Self-reported data: Observation templates, narrative accounts, and journals rely on trainees' own perception and willingness to disclose, which may be affected by social desirability, particularly given that journals were also reviewed as part of coursework.
- Partial inter-rater verification: Independent double-coding was applied to only a subset (20%) of the qualitative data; the remainder was coded by a single researcher, which limits the extent to which coding reliability can be claimed for the full dataset.
- Cross-sectional design: Data were collected during a single placement period, so the findings capture a snapshot of trainees' awareness rather than its development over time.
- Possible under-detection of embedded inequities: The comparatively low frequency of disability-related observations may reflect genuine incidence, but may equally reflect trainees' limited preparation to notice exclusion that is not expressed as a discrete incident; the design cannot distinguish between these explanations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how structured school observation shapes social justice awareness among teacher trainees at one teacher education institution. Trainees frequently encountered socioeconomic disparity, racial and ethnic discrimination, gender-based inequality, language barriers, and disability-related exclusion, and these encounters functioned as identifiable learning moments that supported the development of awareness, critical consciousness, empathy, and a degree of professional agency. At the same time, trainees' reports of helplessness point to a specific and addressable gap: awareness of injustice was not consistently accompanied by a clear sense of how to respond to it within the limits of a trainee's role. The findings support embedding structured critical reflection tools, storytelling and lived-experience narratives, mentorship, and explicit sociological framing into teacher education curricula, alongside the creation of safe spaces for ethical decision-making and role-play. Because the evidence is drawn from a single institution and a cross-sectional design, these recommendations should be treated as context-informed proposals to be tested elsewhere rather than as generalised prescriptions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research should pursue longitudinal designs that track the development of teacher trainees' social justice awareness as they move from training into professional practice, and multi-institutional or comparative designs — for example, across urban and rural placements, or across teacher education programmes in different regions — that can test whether the patterns identified here hold beyond a single institutional context. Studies with full independent double-coding across the entire qualitative dataset would strengthen confidence in thematic findings of this kind. Research that incorporates student perspectives directly, rather than relying solely on trainee accounts, would offer a more complete picture of how social justice issues are experienced in the classroom. Finally, given the specific gap identified here between noticing inequity and

knowing how to respond to it, intervention studies testing structured response protocols — rather than awareness-building alone — represent a promising direction.

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