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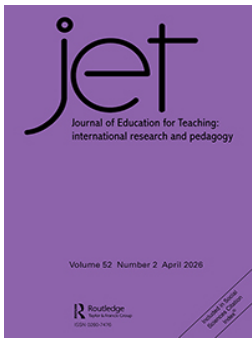
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Mapping critical moments: a collaborative autoethnographical exploration of social justice formation in leaders of teacher educator programmes using life grid methodology

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a collaborative autoethnographical study exploring how critical moments in personal and professional trajectories shape social justice orientations among teacher educators. Drawing on Fuller's (2020) intersectionality life grid methodology, three teacher educators engaged in collaborative reflection to examine pivotal experiences that influenced their understanding of inequality, privilege and educational justice. Through narrative conversations and life grid mapping, the study reveals how seemingly mundane incidents, from childhood experiences of unfairness to adult recognition of privilege, function to shape professional practice and identity. The findings demonstrate the power of collaborative autoethnography as both a research methodology and a tool for professional development, offering insights into how educators can critically examine their own positionality to become more socially just practitioners.

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Introduction

Notions of 'authorised' pedagogies (Dawes 2022), premised on managerialism, performativity and marketisation are positioned by policy makers as the 'silver bullet' to solving England's teacher recruitment and retention crisis (Mutton et al. 2021) and addressing England's 2012 PISA rankings drop. This resulted in policy assemblage (Savage 2021) that has increased control within pre-service teacher education (referred to as Initial Teacher Education, ITE, in England). For example, the Department for Education (Department for Education 2019) introduced the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy, including the now combined Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Core Content Framework (CCF) and Early Career Framework (ECF), collectively known as the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) (Department for Education 2024) to address perceived issues around both programme structure and course content (Mutton and Burn 2024). These

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position teachers' knowledge as codified 'Learn that' statements enacted through standardised 'Learn how to' practices. Such approaches face resistance from academics and educational leaders involved in ITE (Murtagh et al. 2023), especially because they reflect wider education policy trends. In the school sector, for example, this has led to the use of scripted lessons and prescribed pedagogies to prepare pupils for examinations, undermining teachers' autonomy and revealing a government assumption that teachers and teacher educators are technical automatons as opposed to intellectual professionals (Dawes 2022; Murtagh et al. 2023; Pierlejewski, Murtagh, and Humphreys 2025). Growing critique of these purportedly 'evidence-based' practices has become an increasingly prominent discourse within educational circles. Hordern and Brooks (2023), for example, contend that such authorised pedagogical frameworks rest on a constrained understanding of education's purpose, coupled with an overly scientific approach to educational reform. Pierlejewski, Murtagh, and Humphreys (2025) argue that this has led to a simple view of teaching; one that is de-humanising, leading to a performative culture that reduces the process of teaching and learning simply to an 'input-output' calculation (Bernstein 1977, 156). Pierlejewski, Murtagh, and Humphreys (2025) extend Jones and Ellis's (2019) distinction between simple and complex views of teachers' professional development. The complex view emphasises a holistic, humanising understanding of student teachers' lived realities, recognising teaching as unpredictable and shaped by experience. In contrast, the ITTECCF presents teachers as standardised, mechanistic figures; reflecting a simplified view of ITE rooted in 'New Science' assumptions that treat practice as predictable and replicable (Hordern and Brooks 2023).

In the contemporary educational landscape, dominated by neoliberal imperatives that prioritise standardised outcomes, measurable competencies and pedagogical uniformity, the integration of social justice principles into pre-service teacher education becomes critically urgent. The current emphasis on homogenisation and 'pedagogies of sameness' (Lingard 2007, 248) risks producing educators who are ill-equipped to recognise, challenge or disrupt the systemic inequities that pervade educational institutions and broader society. This risks weakening the profession and affecting children's education.

Social justice education in teacher preparation programmes serves as a necessary counterbalance to reductive approaches by fostering critical consciousness, cultural responsiveness and pedagogical flexibility that honours diverse student experiences, identities and ways of knowing. This preparation becomes essential as neoliberal reforms often mask equity concerns behind the rhetoric of efficiency and standardisation, potentially widening achievement gaps and reinforcing existing hierarchies of privilege (Murtagh and Dawes 2024). Without explicit attention to social justice in teacher education, the profession risks reproducing the very inequities that quality education should work to eliminate.

Teaching about social justice is not, however, an easy endeavour. Teacher educators and beginning teachers need to be able to embrace discomfort and grapple with issues that rarely have a single right answer or solution (Stacey et al. 2025). This relies on teacher educators who have a deep understanding of social justice, alongside a confidence to both share their own views and genuinely hear and engage with the perspectives of others.

However, the formation of social justice consciousness among teacher educators is neither linear nor predictable. While much scholarship examines social justice leadership

and pedagogy as established practices, less attention has been paid to the formative moments that spark and sustain educators' commitment to equity. This paper therefore breaks new ground. It addresses this gap through a collaborative autoethnographical exploration of critical incidents that shaped three teacher educators' (the authors of this paper) understanding of social justice, inequality and their professional responsibilities. Concomitantly, this study makes methodological contributions to the field of teacher education, demonstrating the value of combining life grid methodology with collaborative autoethnography.

Methodology

Life grids

The life grid methodology employed in this study was central to interrogating the relationship between personal biography and broader structural influences. Drawing on Fuller's (2020) '7 Up' intersectionality life grid, the authors used a structured, longitudinal tool to explore how individual experiences intersect with macro-level, meso-level and micro-level dynamics (Abbas, Ashwin, and McLean 2013). This enabled reflection in seven-year intervals to identify critical moments shaping social justice awareness and professional identity.

Fuller's life grid is designed not to elicit perfect recall, but to surface the interpretive meaning participants assign to events across time. It encourages reflexivity by asking individuals to consider how their experiences are shaped by and contribute to larger socio-political narratives. In this study, the grid was adapted to focus specifically on moments that influenced the authors' development as leaders in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), with attention to:

- Micro-level: personal, family and community experiences.
- Meso-level: educational and professional contexts.
- Macro-level: policy shifts, socio-political events and cultural discourses.

In this study, the life grids served not only as a data collection tool but also as a catalyst for collaborative reflection.

Collaborative autoethnography

Autoethnography has garnered considerable attention as a methodological approach for deepening comprehension and reshaping perspectives of selfhood and contextual lived experience (Murtagh and Dawes 2022; Denshire 2014; Denzin 2006; Ellis and Bochner 2006), with Rothman (2007, 14) observing that 'in autoethnography, your life is data'. Extending this autoethnographic foundation, Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2016) introduce the concept of 'collaborative' autoethnography whereby autoethnographic inquiry is undertaken collectively by multiple researchers. This approach encourages a community to 'investigate shared stories and balances the individual narrative with the greater collective experiences' (Blalock and Akehi 2018, 94). Collaborative autoethnography operates through critical self-reflection and dialogue, allowing research teams to combine their narratives to identify both shared experiences and divergent perspectives

(Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2016). A collaborative autoethnographic approach was considered appropriate for the present study, intent on understanding the implications for teacher education programmes of the lived experiences of those responsible for leading (or having led) ITE. Such an approach moves beyond individual introspection to foster dialogic reflexivity, where meaning is co-constructed through conversation, critique and mutual vulnerability. It enables transformative learning by creating a space where educators can 'investigate shared stories' and challenge each other's assumptions in a spirit of trust and ethical accountability (Blalock and Akehi 2018).

The collaborative process in this study unfolded in several stages. After constructing individual life grids based on Fuller's (2020) '7 Up' methodology, the authors engaged in a series of reflexive dialogues. These conversations were iterative and emotionally charged, requiring the authors to revisit formative experiences, confront internalised biases and articulate how personal histories shaped their professional identities. The initial conversation revealed social justice as a shared theme across all three grids, prompting the guiding question for subsequent dialogues: 'What critical moments in your personal and professional life shaped your understanding of social justice and educational inequality?'

Through these conversations, the authors explored the:

- emotional labour involved in revisiting painful or complex memories.
- importance of psychological safety and trust in enabling vulnerability.
- tensions between personal values and institutional expectations.
- ethical implications of their leadership roles in shaping teacher education programmes.

This exemplifies autoethnography's power to reframe selfhood through lived experience. However, as Roy and Uekusa (2020) note, collaborative autoethnography can risk subjectivity and lack of rigour if not carefully managed. In this study, the frequent and open communication among the authors, their shared commitment to critical dialogue and their methodological transparency helped mitigate these risks and fostered what they term 'collective critical consciousness'; a shared, reflective awareness that emerged through the dialogic examination of individual experience.

Emerging from discussions around their roles as female teacher educators, the authors were interested in how their past experiences had shaped their professional identity as female leaders of ITE. They pooled their life stories, having adapted Fuller's (2020) methodology to focus specifically on critical moments related to the formation of their professional identity as a leader, creating grids that capture:

- Personal/family/community experiences (micro level)
- Educational and professional contexts (meso level)
- Policy and socio-political factors (macro level)

The rationale for focussing specifically on critical moments is based on the authors' understanding that these are not seen as inherently dramatic events, but as moments that become meaningful through subsequent analysis and connection to broader patterns of social justice. These moments function as what Mezirow (1997) terms

'disorienting dilemmas'; experiences that challenge existing assumptions and catalyse transformative learning.

Data collection occurred through

Individual life grid construction: Each author created a chronological life grid following Fuller's (2020) framework, identifying critical moments related to their journey to becoming a leader of ITE

Reflexive dialogues: The grids were shared and a series of ongoing rich and critical conversations took place. Grids were analysed at an individual and collective level. In the initial conversation, it quickly emerged that social justice was a theme that ran through each grid and a guiding question for the remaining four conversations was identified: 'what critical moments in your personal and professional life shaped your understanding of social justice and educational inequality?'. In the conversations, the following aspects were discussed:

- particular periods of time and the similarities and differences in their memories of key historical and political moments;
- specific individual memories and their impact on the individual's understanding of social justice;
- how understanding of social justice has shaped their identity as leaders of ITE;
- their collective understanding of social justice and the importance of its presence in a teacher preparation programme.

The research underpinning this paper received ethical approval and was conducted in line with university ethics requirements and British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA 2018). There are no competing interests to declare.

Analysis

Data from the life grids were analysed through use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach to locate the most common and salient themes within the data:

- (1) Familiarisation with the data
- (2) Coding of the data to generate pithy labels for important features
- (3) Searching for themes
- (4) Reviewing themes
- (5) Defining and naming themes
- (6) Writing up

The authors engaged in several iterative reflexive conversations over a 12-month period to search for and review themes. These were undertaken in the spirit of trust and sensitivity and findings reflect specific examples of critical moments that served as provocations for developing consciousness around themes of social justice.

Findings

This section begins with an overview of the critical incidents identified through the life grid methodology of the three authors, Lisa, Stef and Keither, who all work in different English Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and have extensive experience in leading Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Their backgrounds reflect different social class origins, educational trajectories and geographical contexts, providing rich comparative material for analysis.

Lisa

Lisa's move to Barrow-in-Furness in the 1980s from Manchester exposed her to the stark realities of social and educational inequality that would later shape her commitment to social justice in education. Coming from a lower middle-class family where her father worked as a bank manager, she initially found refuge from the bullying she experienced at her former Manchester secondary school (pupils aged 11–16) in Barrow's working-class community centred around the Vickers shipyard.

However, this comfort became complicity when she abandoned her university aspirations to conform to local expectations of early marriage and employment. By choosing the security of a relationship with a shipyard worker and taking a bank clerk position, Lisa was unconsciously accepting limiting social structures that constrained opportunities for working-class young people, particularly women.

Her father's intervention represented a form of social justice advocacy within her family. His questioning of her choices challenged the normalisation of reduced aspirations and highlighted how social circumstances can narrow life possibilities. When he asked robust questions about her decisions, he was essentially disrupting patterns of social reproduction that keep individuals trapped in limited trajectories.

Lisa's eventual decision to leave banking for teacher education marked her awakening to issues of educational equity. She realised how her family relationships, and especially that with her father were a privilege that had initially shielded her from understanding the systemic barriers that constrain opportunities for others in similar circumstances.

Lisa recognises this as a critical incident that now drives her work as an education professor focused on social justice; helping her to help pre-service teachers to recognise how social structures shape educational outcomes; challenging them to question practices that perpetuate inequality. Lisa's experience demonstrates how personal transformation and social justice awareness often emerge from confronting one's own complicity in systems of oppression.

Stef

Being placed in the 'top stream' at secondary school, Stef existed within an educational apartheid that segregated students by perceived ability, effectively reinforcing class divisions. Her social circle, which through primary school had been diverse, became homogeneous, isolating her from peers who had not been deemed academically bright at the age of 11. A school reunion became a moment of reckoning with systemic inequality. Students from 'lower streams' knew her after 15 years of leaving school, while she had

no knowledge of them – a stark illustration of how educational hierarchies create one-way visibility. Those labelled as ‘less able’ were forced to be aware of the ‘successful’ students, while the top stream pupils remained oblivious of their experiences. This asymmetry reveals how streaming systems function as mechanisms of social reproduction, maintaining existing power structures.

Stef’s upbringing instilled deficit thinking about communities different to her own, through seemingly benign family discourse. In particular, her mother’s language, though not intentionally malicious, reinforced deficit assumptions that she unconsciously absorbed. Stef reflected on how she has had to work hard over her adult years to challenge inbuilt biases. This has involved developing a set of values and beliefs that have at times been at odds with some family members, and this has not always been easy.

Whilst coming from a privileged background, Stef has experienced a variety of personal crises that have forced her to confront how privilege can blind us to systemic inequalities and our role in perpetuating them.

As a ‘recovering privileged kid’, Stef understands that social justice in education requires critiquing and dismantling the very structures that once benefited her. She strongly believes that beginning teachers need to be given opportunities to share their histories and learn from different perspectives. They need to be challenged to rethink deep seated beliefs and be educated to think differently, but this must be done through care and not through criticism of their personal narratives.

Keither

Keither’s sense of social justice developed early through a series of direct encounters with educational inequality and systemic oppression.

Growing up on a Hull council estate, Keither experienced the intersection of gender and social class discrimination and family instability. Regularly warned against getting ‘ideas above her station’ as a ‘bright’ working-class girl, she experienced how schools (and families) can perpetuate class-based and gender discrimination through low expectations and arbitrary punitive practices that effectively silenced marginalised voices, especially the voices of girls.

In school, one defining moment came at age 10 when the Headteacher claimed Keither’s entry in a writing competition was ‘too good’ for ‘someone her age’ and that she must have copied it. Despite no evidence and adamant denials, she was disqualified and punished. This pivotal experience crystallised a profound realisation about systemic unfairness: effort and ability were irrelevant when fixed expectations predetermined what working-class children could achieve. Keither reflected that she learned two crucial lessons about inequality at this time: first, that the system itself was ‘deeply unfair’ and second, that many children lack voice and agency, while their families feel unable to advocate – insights that would fundamentally shape her practice as teacher, school leader and teacher educator.

Keither’s developing social consciousness expanded further through family complexities which she refers to as the absence of ‘anchoring’, the foundational family support that is often taken for granted. Family instability characterised by the absence of both natural parents, caring for young siblings and living in condemned housing, revealed how

socioeconomic disadvantage, together with 'traditional' family expectations, compounds educational barriers. Keither began to understand how inequality operates through multiple, intersecting disadvantages. Observing gendered double standards (women who leave families being judged more harshly than men) further sharpened her awareness of systemic injustice and patriarchal society.

By secondary school, Keither felt 'armed with a growing sense of inequality in society and how people were treated differently', particularly girls at this time. After re-taking O'levels and going to Further Education college, encountering middle-class and privately educated peers revealed inequality's full dimensions: not just material disparities but differences in life experiences, cultural capital, language and the deference that lecturers showed students from local 'business families' in comparison to others, reinforcing Keither's understanding of inequality and commitment to educational equity.

Continuing education into Higher Education meant navigating family opposition, pressure to contribute financially and complex institutional processes – barriers still present for some from working-class families today. Most challenging was internal conflict as Keither's emerging feminist and political views clashed with her family's traditional class and gender expectations, creating a sense of 'otherness'.

These layered experiences made up of 'critical moments' ultimately shaped Keither's commitment as an educator to social justice – to fairness, voice, agency and respecting all students' lived experiences.

Analysis of the three cases revealed three overarching themes in the formation of social justice consciousness: Foundational Disruptions, Recognition Moments and Professional Transformations. Each theme encompasses critical incidents that the authors identified as pivotal in shaping their social justice orientations. The process of developing the three overarching themes involved several methodological struggles and rounds of refinement. At times, the authors found it difficult to distinguish whether certain clusters of codes represented distinct concepts or different expressions of the same underlying phenomenon. For example, early codes relating to childhood unfairness and schooling inequalities initially appeared separate, but through collaborative discussion and repeated returning to the transcripts, the authors recognised their conceptual overlap and merged them into the broader theme of *foundational disruptions*. Refining the themes required negotiating differences in interpretation, testing assumptions against direct quotations and revisiting the life grids to ensure the themes adequately reflected both individual and shared experiences. This iterative, dialogic engagement was essential in arriving at a coherent thematic structure.

Foundational disruptions - childhood encounters with injustice

All three authors identified childhood experiences of unfairness or injustice as foundational to their later social justice consciousness. These incidents, often seemingly minor in isolation, created what Keither termed 'cracks in the facade' of assumed fairness.

Keither's reflection on the writing competition

As indicated above, a pivotal moment for Keither's emerging understanding of unfairness and injustice was as a very young girl when she entered a writing competition at school. This proved to be a fundamental and lasting reminder of the damaging effect of low

expectations and the assumptions we make around parental advocacy. Reflecting on this moment Keither says, 'When I was called to the Headteacher's office and asked where I had copied the story from, I recall being totally bewildered ... I understood something that I hadn't before; that it was irrelevant what I did or how hard I tried, as there were fixed expectations of what I could and couldn't do and this was deeply unfair'.

This incident exemplifies what the authors term institutional betrayal; moments when educational institutions fail to recognise or support a student's potential based on pre-conceived notions about social class, ability or worthiness. Keither's experience reveals how early encounters with educational injustice can spark lifelong commitments to fairness.

Stef's school reunion revelation

Stef's critical moment came much later but reflected back on her school experience:

At the reunion, everyone knew who I was but there were a lot of people who I had no idea who they were ... people who had been in the 'lower streams' at school did know more about the people in higher streams ... The same wasn't true the other way round.

This moment of recognition forced Stef to confront how educational streaming had shaped her worldview and was critical in enabling her to 'reflect on my upbringing and my thinking about social justice'.

Lisa's family dynamics and professional support

Lisa's narrative reveals how family responses to educational choices can become critical moments:

My father expressed concerns about my engagement ... and my decision not to go to university. He articulated these firmly, posing robust questions about my decisions ... My parents asked questions and listened and, despite the financial demands this change would put on them encouraged my decision to leave the bank and start a four-year undergraduate degree in education.

This incident demonstrates how supported questioning; being challenged while feeling safe, can become a model for professional practice.

Recognition moments - encountering privilege and difference

A second pattern involved adult recognition of previously invisible privileges or systemic inequalities. These moments often occurred through encounters with difference or through educational experiences that expanded the authors' world views.

Stef's awakening to class privilege

At 16, Stef, and a small group of friends, chose to attend an inner city sixth form college that was not the usual choice for academically successful pupils from her secondary school. With a very mixed student demographic, this experience really highlighted difference for the first time to Stef, 'not just difference in how much money or resources we all had but the different life experiences we had, the social and cultural experiences and differences in language and accent'.

Stef's 2 years at sixth form enabled her to begin to confront her own naivety about equity and fairness in society, challenged her to recognise her privilege and awakened her interest in social justice and inclusion.

Keither's family instability as insight

Keither's complex family situation provided ongoing recognition of difference:

By the time I was 12 years old neither of my natural parents were living at home and I had substantial responsibility for my younger siblings ... I was navigating a family life that was untypical and complex, with the clear understanding that it was very important not to talk about what was going on.

These experiences of concealed difference sensitised Keither to how students might be managing invisible challenges while maintaining facades of normalcy.

Lisa's geographical and social mobility

Lisa's move from Manchester to Barrow-in-Furness created a transformative contrast:

The move to Barrow threw me a metaphorical lifeline at the time. I became popular in my class ... However, the comfort of being in a relationship ... saw me turn down degree offers and flunk my A levels.

This narrative reveals how social mobility and changing contexts can both enable and constrain educational choices, providing Lisa with embodied understanding of how relationship dynamics intersect with educational opportunities.

Professional transformations - integrating personal and professional understanding

The third theme involves how personal experiences of injustice, privilege and difference became integrated into professional practice and identity as teacher educators.

Keither's Commitment to Voice and Agency

Keither's childhood experience of not being believed (as described earlier) transformed into professional commitment:

These views undoubtedly shaped my thinking and actions as a schoolteacher and leader and also as teacher educator ... I also learnt that whilst many children are denied opportunities to develop voice and agency, not all parents exercise their voice either.

Stef's focus on safe spaces for growth

Stef's recognition of privilege led to her emphasis on creating supportive environments for professional development, and she believes her experiences have given her 'an empathy for beginning teachers who come to us from privileged backgrounds and who say crass things at times in relation to, for example, social class. I think I probably did this in the past. I have colleagues who get very cross with such students (understandably) but I see our role as needing to gently open their eyes and nudge them to have a deeper understanding of social justice and inclusion'

Lisa's model of supported challenge

Lisa's family experience of being questioned while feeling supported became a template for professional practice:

My father's approach unknowingly modelled what Tripp would call 'professional judgement in action'—the delicate balance between challenge and support that I now foster in my work with pre-service teachers.

Discussion

The complexity of social justice formation

Social justice consciousness among educators is a layered, evolving process shaped by personal biography, social positioning and professional context. Rather than emerging from singular events, the authors describe a gradual development of awareness, an accumulation of insights reinterpreted through experience and reflection. Echoing Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning, the authors' narratives show how 'disorienting dilemmas' catalyse reflection and identity reconfiguration. This challenges simplistic notions of 'critical incidents' as isolated turning points, instead positioning them within a broader temporal and relational framework. Life grid methodology surfaced this complexity, allowing the authors to trace how past events gained new significance. For instance, Keither's childhood disappointment – her writing competition experience – gained meaning when revisited through the lens of professional responsibility. Similarly, Stef's school reunion became a critical moment when viewed through her emerging identity as a teacher educator, illustrating how professional roles reframe personal memories and deepen social justice understanding.

Building on this, the data strongly reflected Mezirow's emphasis on transformation as a fundamental shift in one's 'frame of reference'. The three overarching themes the authors developed each illustrate how critical incidents prompted the authors to reinterpret previously held assumptions about fairness, inequality and professional responsibility; disrupting existing meaning structures, initiating deeper reflection and ultimately reshaping how each author understood social justice within their professional identities. Making these interpretive shifts explicit strengthens the connection between the analytical findings and Mezirow's transformative learning theory, demonstrating how social justice consciousness develops through cumulative reframing rather than isolated events.

This reconfiguration suggests social justice formation is not merely about acquiring knowledge or adopting values, but cultivating a reflective disposition that enables educators to reinterpret life narratives in light of evolving ethical commitments. It underscores the importance of recognising identity as situated within intersecting structures of power, privilege and marginalisation. The findings point to the need for teacher education programmes to move beyond static models of identity development and embrace dynamic, longitudinal approaches that support ongoing reflection. This is especially urgent in the context of neoliberal reforms that prioritise standardisation and performativity (Dawes 2022), which risk bleaching out the nuanced, ethical dimensions of teaching. By cultivating reflective dispositions, educators are better equipped to interrogate how their histories inform pedagogical choices and how these choices can reinforce or disrupt systemic inequities.

The role of collaborative reflection

The study highlights the transformative potential of collaborative reflection in deepening educators' understanding of social justice and professional identity. This resonates with Blalock and Akehi's (2018) notion of collaborative autoethnography as a pathway for transformative learning, where shared inquiry fosters mutual understanding and ethical growth. Through dialogic engagement, the authors uncovered new layers of meaning, often prompted by others' stories. This mutual reflection did not simply validate individual narratives, it reshaped them. Stef's reflection on Keither's writing competition prompted her to revisit the unfairness of the schooling system she experienced and re-examine it through the lens of a child who might not have been placed in the top stream, while Keither's engagement with Lisa's account of 'supported challenge' illuminated gaps in her own schooling experience. These exchanges show how collaborative autoethnography functions not only as a research method but as a powerful form of professional development, enabling educators critically to examine practice through shared inquiry.

What makes collaborative reflection impactful is its capacity to foster 'dialogic reflexivity': a mode of reflection that is relational, responsive and ethically attuned. Unlike solitary introspection, dialogic reflexivity involves engaging with others' perspectives in ways that challenge assumptions and open new interpretive possibilities. It requires vulnerability, openness and a willingness to be unsettled. In this study, the design created spaces where such engagement could occur, allowing the authors to move beyond individual insight towards collective critical consciousness. This suggests that teacher education should encourage personal reflection and foster collaborative structures, such as peer dialogue and facilitated storytelling, that support educators in thinking together about practice. These structures must promote psychological safety, mutual respect and ethical accountability, ensuring critique is balanced with care and difference is embraced as a resource for learning.

Implications of the study

This study contributes to teacher education by combining life grid methodology with collaborative autoethnography to explore the formation of social justice consciousness among ITE leaders. The implications are profound, demanding a shift from prescribed models of training towards more reflective, identity-conscious and socially engaged approaches. At the heart of this transformation is the recognition that educators' personal histories and lived experiences are central to how they understand learners, interpret pedagogy and enact educational values. Indeed, this transformational shift applies across the ecosystem of teacher education, from teacher educators as reflective practitioners, to leaders of ITE in shaping programme ethos and to the design of ITE programmes themselves, which influence how beginning teachers conceptualise their identities and responsibilities. Moving away from prescriptive models is therefore a multi-layered endeavour requiring alignment across professional roles and structures.

One key implication is the need to cultivate biographical awareness and reflexivity among teacher educators. Structured opportunities should be embedded within programmes to help educators explore how formative life experiences, such as childhood memories, schooling encounters and early career moments, shape their assumptions about teaching and learning. This helps educators examine biases and narratives

influencing decisions. For instance, beliefs about students' potential or parental involvement often stem from deeply rooted personal experiences. When surfaced and interrogated, educators are better positioned to adopt more equitable and empathetic practices.

Another important consideration is the creation of environments that support questioning and safe challenge. The concept of 'supported challenge', as illustrated in Lisa's example, highlights the importance of professional spaces where educators feel psychologically safe to engage in critical self-examination. Growth occurs most meaningfully when critique is balanced with care. Teacher education programmes should incorporate dialogic structures – such as peer mentoring, collaborative inquiry and facilitated autoethnographic reflection – that encourage open, respectful conversations. These spaces must be intentionally designed to foster trust and mutual respect, allowing educators to challenge assumptions without fear of judgement.

A further implication involves fostering an intersectional understanding of identity and experience. Drawing on Fuller's (2020) framework, teacher education must actively engage educators in exploring how intersecting social identities, such as race, class, gender and geography, shape both their own educational journeys and those of their students. This lens moves beyond superficial diversity efforts towards deeper engagement with systemic inequities. Programmes should incorporate narrative inquiry, case studies and critical pedagogy to illuminate how overlapping social positions influence access, opportunity and educational outcomes.

It is also essential that teacher education helps educators connect personal narratives to broader systemic patterns. While individual stories are powerful tools for reflection, they gain transformative potential when situated within socio-political and historical contexts. Educators must be supported in drawing connections between lived experiences and larger structures of inequality, such as neoliberal education policies, the reproduction of social class through schooling or the marginalisation of specific communities. This systemic awareness empowers educators to become agents of change, capable of advocating for more just and inclusive educational practices.

Finally, this study highlights the value of methodological innovation in professional development. The integration of life grid methodology with collaborative autoethnography offers a dynamic model for reflective practice. This enables systematic life trajectory analysis and shared insight. Teacher education programmes should consider embedding such approaches not only in research contexts but also within ongoing professional development, cultivating what this study terms 'collective critical consciousness': a shared, reflective awareness that supports transformative educational practice.

Limitations and future directions

This study reflects experiences of three female teacher educators. Future research should explore social justice formation across more diverse educational settings and with educators from different backgrounds. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how social justice consciousness evolves throughout professional careers.

The collaborative autoethnographic methodology, while powerful for generating insights, requires careful attention to power dynamics within the research process. Future studies should explore how different forms of privilege and marginalisation affect participation in collaborative reflection.

Conclusion

This exploration shows social justice awareness emerges through personal experience, learning and reflection. Critical incidents gain meaning not through inherent drama but through their connection to broader patterns of educational inequality and opportunity.

The life grid methodology provides a valuable framework for systematic biographical reflection, while collaborative analysis enables the kind of critical dialogue essential for transformative professional development. Together, these approaches offer teacher educators tools for examining how their own experiences shape practice and for developing more socially just approaches to education.

The findings suggest that social justice in teacher education requires not just theoretical understanding but deep biographical work – examining how one’s experiences of fairness, privilege and opportunity shape assumptions about students, families and educational possibility. In sum, this study offers a compelling argument for rehumanising teacher education through methodological innovation and reflective practice. It affirms that understanding one’s own story is foundational to recognising and valuing the diverse narratives students bring to the classroom. As Keither aptly noted: ‘Understanding my own story helps me recognise that every student brings their own complex narrative to our classrooms. Social justice isn’t just about policy – it’s about seeing and valuing the full humanity of every learner’.

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AI use disclosure statement

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