

# Teachers' Beliefs about Educational Justice in an Advancement via Individual Determination (A.V.I.D.) Program

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**Abstract** This research project explored the impact of seven teachers' life experiences on their core beliefs about educationally just teaching philosophy and practices. Results of a qualitative, phenomenological case study yielded six themes, each revealing particular connections between teachers' life experiences and their beliefs about educational justice. The research was conducted at high-school sites within programs designed to foster educational opportunities for students not academically succeeding within their respective institutions. Results were based on extensive interviews and classroom observations. The work is grounded in educational justice scholarship and has particular significance for teachers who work with disenfranchised student populations.

**Keywords** Educational Justice, Teaching Philosophy And Practices, Classroom Observations

## 1. Introduction

A core thread of teacher-education scholarship focuses on teacher beliefs as they underpin classroom practices related to tenets of educational justice (Colucci, 2000; Delpit, 1996; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998; Strong-Wilson, 2008; Warren, 2002). Educational justice principles have become a foundational topic in the scholarly literature on education and the social sciences (North, 2006). In light of the importance of educational justice principles in today's complexity of school dynamics, this text explores the place of teachers' beliefs about this topic. An introductory background related to teachers' belief systems is presented, followed by a discussion of how this issue is characterized by teacher-education research. The case-study research project reveals insight about how teachers' life stories shape their beliefs about educational justice as they work with students in the AVID program (Advancement Through Individual Determination). Through AVID, students' chances for

academic success and self worth are increased (Cunningham, Redmond, & Merisotis, 2003; Guthrie & Guthrie, 2002; Johnston, 2007; Simmons, 2007; Watt, Powell, & Mendiola, 2004; Watt, Yanex, & Cossio, 2003). This work offers a unique profile about how particular teachers' life experiences merge with their core beliefs to foster justice for students who most need support.

### 1.1. Background

Two points are set forth as a central backdrop for this research project. First of all, a focus on social and educational justice within teacher preparation programs and educational-research scholarship has become widespread and fundamental. Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow and Mitescu (2008), for example, point out that the term "social and educational justice" has become a watchword within N.A.M.E. (National Association for Multicultural Education), N.N.E.R. (National Network for Education Renewal), A.A.C.T.E. (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Preparation), and N.C.A.T.E. (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education). Enterline et al (2008) set the goal of sensitizing teacher candidates to the importance of social justice principles alongside another prevailing trend of ensuring assessment outcomes, saying that, "it is assumed that the bottom line of teaching is enhancing students' learning and their life chances by challenging the inequities of school and society" (p. 270). This statement has been echoed in complementary ways by many others (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 1999, 2004; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Michelli & Keiser, 2005; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner, 2005).

Secondly, research has explored teachers' belief systems as an important variable within teacher-education circles and professional teaching contexts over many years. Some time back, Pajaras (1992) wrote that "the belief structures of teachers and teaching candidates is essential to improving

their professional preparation and teaching practices" (p. 307). Fenstermacher (1979) is credited for predicting that, in Pajaras' words, "the study of beliefs would become the focus for teacher effectiveness research" (p. 307). He further commented that the study of beliefs might "prove the most valuable psychological construct to teacher education" (p. 308). His synthesis of findings on beliefs has been grounded in a comprehensive range of scholarship and has proven noteworthy, especially given the focus of this research article. For example, beliefs are formed early and tend to self-perpetuate, persevering against most challenges of reason or experience, and housing critical processes of cultural transmission. Further, the adaptive function of belief systems ultimately filters new experiences and phenomena, with substructures such as educational beliefs understood in terms of their connections to other centrally related beliefs that strongly affect behavior. These statements are agreed upon by a range of other theorists (Bandura, 1986; Dewey, 1933; Rokeach, 1968). Pajaras' assertion that "the investigation of teachers' beliefs is a necessary avenue of educational inquiry" (p. 326) is linked in spirit to current research on teacher beliefs about social and educational justice. Exploration of this body of scholarship now follows.

### 1.2. Shaping Educational Justice Beliefs through Teacher Education

Cochran-Smith's work has been important in its focus on new teachers' belief systems about educational justice (1999; 2004; 2008). This work falls almost exclusively within the domain of teacher-preparation. Her 2008 book, with Fieman-Nemser and McIntyre, aligns with key voices within the field of critical pedagogy and multicultural teaching (Banks, 1997; Sleeter, 1994; Grant & Augusto, 2008), who, in turn, enrich their foundational beliefs through theorists such as Gramsci (1971/1992), Friere (2006), Giroux (1988), Greene (1988), Apple, (2007) McLaren (1989), hooks, (1994), and Anyon (2005). Darder, Baltodano & Torres (2009) summarized the connection between the field of critical pedagogy and social and educational justice theory in this comment: "critical pedagogy emerged from a long historical legacy of radical social thought and progressive movement, which aspired to link practices of schooling to democratic principles of society and transformative social action in the interest of oppressed communities" (p.2). Cochran-Smith's work stressed future teachers' potential for advancing social and educational justice, confronting racial and ethnic disparities, and ensuring equitable access to a sound education for all students.

Those who are invested in educating teachers to implement social and educational justice do so with full respect for the foundational importance of those teachers' stances, outlooks or, as the current scholarship phrases it, their beliefs. A range of work has focused on actually measuring teacher candidates' initial belief structures about educational justice and changes that may occur as a result of education. Enterline et al (2008) sought to investigate the

extent to which beliefs about social justice change as a result of teacher education. They suggested that learning to teach for social justice is assessable and contribute a LTSJ-B scale (Learning to Teach for Social Justice Beliefs), writing that this construct is "a complex but measurable outcome of teacher preparation using a variety of assessments and protocols based on quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods for data collection and analysis (p. 268). Interrelated work by Ludlow, Enterline and Cochran-Smith, M. (2008) explored this same phenomenon. The work of others in varying contexts has explored differing emphases related to beliefs about social justice: (a) how mentors' beliefs can influence teacher candidates away from social justice reflection (Cherian, 2007); (b) students' and teachers' beliefs about the just distribution of "educational goods" (Sabbagh, Resh, Mor, & Vanhuysse, 2006); and (c) various attempts to measure belief systems about social justice (Brown, 2004; Schectman, 2002).

### 1.3. Teachers' Beliefs, Self Identity and Educational Justice

In connecting teacher beliefs to practice, one must first look at why teachers' beliefs matter in education. Warren (2002) claimed that "instead of expecting improvement by changing students or their families, adding new curriculum, or increasing the education of teachers, researchers must consider the belief systems of educators as they interact with students and affect the culture of the classroom and school at large" (p. 110). Likewise, Palmer (1998) advanced the premise that good teaching has more to do with the identity and integrity of the teacher than it does to good technique. Hooks (1994) spoke to the belief that teachers need to be actively engaged in their own process of self-actualization that contributes to their own well-being and only in doing so will they be able to engage and empower students. Delpit (1995) said that "we do not really see through our eyes and hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves" (p. 47). Although Delpit goes on to argue that sometimes it is necessary to suspend one's beliefs in order to see things from the perspective of someone else, she makes this claim within the context of her recognition that beliefs are fundamental. Colucci (2000) echoed this claim when she wrote that "the beliefs we hold and the underlying assumptions we make as educators color everything we do in schools from the decisions we make and the relationships we form, to the instructional approaches we use" (p. 27).

Palmer (1998) also asserted that teaching is a calling and that educators should reflect on why they entered the teaching profession in the first place. He noted that "if identity and integrity are found at the intersection of the forces that converge in our lives, revisiting some of the convergences that called us towards teaching may allow us to reclaim the selfhood from which good teaching comes" (p. 21). Furthermore, Palmer noted "the inward teacher is the living core of our lives that is addressed and evoked by any

education worthy of the name. Perhaps the idea is unpopular because it compels us to look at two of the most difficult truths about teaching. The first is that what we teach will never ‘take’ unless it connects with the inward, living core of our students’ lives...” (Palmer, 1998, p. 31). Here, Palmer looked at the ways in which the lives of teachers must connect to both the curriculum and students’ lives. Palmer also addressed the heightened degree of awareness that teaching requires and how this awareness often exists in what he deemed a paradox, or creative tension. It is this paradox, in practice, that can help “illuminate the selfhood of any teacher...” (p. 77). In looking at teacher beliefs through an educational and social justice lens, one must go further to see how and why they matter in the classroom.

#### 1.4. Social Justice Beliefs and Classroom Practices

Once educational communities come to a better understanding of what teacher beliefs are and where they come from, they also need to look at how these beliefs influence practice. Ron Scapp (as cited in hooks, 1994) contended that “[teachers’] work brings [them]selves... into the classroom” (p. 137). Palmer (2000) advocated teachers exposing, and not hiding, their true selves to students by recounting his personal experiences as a child when few adults in his life were willing to talk about mistakes they had made or darkness they had faced. He went on to say how this helped to create his own feelings of failure and that he did not realize that he had “merely embarked on a journey towards joining the human race” (p. 19). Hooks (1994) made a similar claim when she asserted that if teachers expect students to take risks, they themselves need to be able to be vulnerable and be willing to link personal narratives to academic content to show how such personal experience can “illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material” (p. 21). Critical theory also posits that, even if not all students choose to take part in the experiences, teachers need to create agendas of possibility and hope in their classrooms (McLaren, 1998). Many theorists have advanced the idea that curriculum should present information in meaningful contexts, not in isolated bits of data and students need to create meaning as part of connected communities (Palmer, 1998; hooks, 1994). Likewise, curriculum should allow for a certain amount of flexibility and should never have an absolute set agenda; in other words, curriculum should be shaped, in part, by the teachers and students who are interacting with the curriculum (hooks, 1994; Borko, 2004). Teacher’s belief systems about social justice are shaped, assessed and implemented in diverse educational contexts; the particular teachers featured in this study show us the significance of their own life experiences as these beliefs are shaped in particular ways for the students in the AVID program.

There has been some work related to social and educational justice with the AVID program but that scholarship is scant in key ways. For example, though some work has focused on the strengths and merits of the AVID

program, those efforts have not been explicitly linked to the breadth of this platform in critical ways. That is, research has revealed ... while not specifically pointing to teachers’ beliefs about core issues of educational justice in the AVID program as does the research reported here. Moreover, teachers’ beliefs can be inferred from the work reported (*some of that work needs to be here somewhere in about two sentences*). None of these studies has endeavored to do what we undertake in this study – that is look at teachers’ beliefs about educational justice in an AVID setting in particular. We thus establish this work in that void and now proceed to a discussion about methodology through which our study was conducted.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

This case study included a total of seven primary participants (N = 7). The researcher selected the seven participants through snowball, or chain, purposeful sampling enabling deliberate recruitment of participants who were most appropriate to the study. Identification of participants through this means has been well established in the research literature (Creswell, 2007) and was seen as the most effective way of finding appropriate, informed, and experienced teachers for the purposes of the research undertaken. AVID administrators identified teachers who reflected the mission and philosophy of educational justice practices consistent with the AVID mission. Potential participants were currently teaching one or more sections of the high school AVID elective course at a comprehensive public high school in California, had tenure, and were identified as “highly qualified” in accordance with legislative mandates. The participants were of mixed gender and had varied years of teaching experience, allowing for some variance in terms of perspective and life stories of the participants.

### 2.2. Data Collection

Data collection entailed pre- and post-observation interviews, direct classroom observations, and focus group discussion. Throughout the study, the researcher used member checking which involved “having research participants review statements in the report for accuracy and completeness” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 475). This process increased the credibility of the findings, ensuring that the reported results were an accurate interpretation of the participants’ meaning (Creswell, 2007). The researcher used post-observation interviews, direct classroom observations, and a focus group discussion as means of triangulating data with the research participants.

The research was conducted in the natural setting of the classroom and school environment where participants worked each day. This allowed the researcher face-to-face interaction with participants over time and the ability to

gather data by talking to them directly and seeing them behave and act within their contexts (Creswell, 2007). All seven teachers taught at comprehensive public high schools in southern California. These schools varied from rural to urban settings, with student populations ranging from 932 students to 3,086 students ([www.ed-data.k12.ca.us](http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us)).

Data were collected according to standard case study procedures over a period of two months; this entailed one-on-one semi-structured interviews with primary participants, classroom observations with field notes, and a focus group discussion with all participants.

### 2.2.1. Pre- and Post-Observation Interviews

One-on-one semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Lichtman, 2006) were conducted allowing primary participants to explore their life-experience stories in response to central research questions. One pre-observation and one post-observation interview was conducted with each participant; interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes each. A pre-designed interview protocol was used and notes were gathered during the interviews that were gathered via email and in the participants' classrooms. The interview questions were designed in connection with the four key tenets of the AVID philosophy – i.e. that students will (1) succeed in rigorous curriculum, (2) enter mainstream activities of the school, (3) increase their enrollment in four-year colleges, and (4) become educated and responsible participants and leaders in a democratic society (Ward, 2003). These precepts are consistent with educational justice in that they were designed to ensure opportunities for students not typically afforded such experiences.

Constant-comparative analysis was applied to identify emerging themes within the pre- and post-observation interview data as patterns emerged and correspondence between two or more categories was evident (Creswell, 2007). These patterns were then used as a starting point for analysis of classroom observations. Post-observation interviews increased the credibility of the study because they allowed member checking for accuracy of interpretation of emerging themes.

### 2.2.2. Direct Classroom Observations

Direct classroom observations were used to triangulate data and gain greater insight into the context in which the teachers' lived experiences occurred. Observations in natural settings, which in this case were the classrooms and schools of the AVID teachers, can be "rendered as descriptions either through open-ended narrative or through the use of ...check-lists or field guides" (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000, p. 674). In fact, open-ended narrative notes were taken yielding portraits of the informant within their respective physical settings and engaged in typical daily routines. The four observations for each participant lasted for one class period.

### 2.2.3. Focus Group

The purpose of conducting the focus group was two-fold.

First, the focus group provided an opportunity for AVID teachers to "stimulate others to comment or react in ways that [did] not occur in individual interviews" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 129). Secondly, the focus group provided an opportunity for the researcher to share initial findings with the participants and to have a conversation regarding these findings. The focus group was semi-structured in nature. Participants met for approximately an hour for it. It was audio-taped and transcribed; analysis was consistent with the six themes derived from an analysis of the pre and post-observation interviews. Altogether, the pre and post-observation interviews, class observations, and focus group interviews allowed facilitated triangulation, ensuring that results were consistent across data.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

Inductive data analysis was used, with themes being identified from the "bottom-up" and organized from more concrete to increasingly abstract units of information (Creswell, 2007). The data were analyzed through the theoretical lens of critical pedagogy and through interpretive inquiry to interpret what was heard, seen, and understood. A complex picture of the cases emerged to create a holistic account of the "complex interactions of factors in the [cases]" (Creswell, 2007, p. 39).

Directly after each interview, observation, and the focus group conversation, the researcher reviewed field notes and also took further notes with any additional impressions, thoughts, questions, and/or emergent thematic patterns. Data were triangulated to check the perceptions of the teachers themselves (revealed through interviews and focus group discussions) against direct classroom observations. The data were also analyzed to yield a more complete narrative picture of the teachers' life stories as they informed current practice. The results were analyzed through both case-by-case and cross-case analysis (Borman, Clarke, Cotner, & Lee, 2006; Yin, 1994).

## 3. Results

The results of the study provide a fleshed-out picture of teachers' life stories and beliefs about educational justice as they relate to their classroom practices. It must be noted that there is little existing data on AVID and educational justice. Likewise, there is little existing qualitative data on the life experiences and beliefs of AVID teachers. Thus, the results of this study are important for a number of reasons. The data contribute to the existing field of research by giving the reader a sense of what educational justice looks like for particular teachers, in a particular context, working with a particular group of students. The data also are important because they show how educational justice appears in practice while validating and reaffirming social and educational justice theory. The results move social and educational justice from the conceptual and theoretical

platform to one of practice, thus illuminating the importance of praxis to the field of education. The study has taken educational justice theory, applied qualitative research methodology specific to case study research, and as a result has authentically rendered a picture of how the life stories and beliefs of AVID teachers have informed their classroom practices, influencing them to create more educationally just classroom contexts.

### 3.1. Data Analysis and Representation

Data analysis proceeded through initial organization, to coding, and then condensing of codes in order to produce emergent themes (Creswell, 2007). In terms of depicting the salient elements of teachers' experiences, key events were selected and summarized, then sequenced in the form of storied representations. Eisenhart (2006) maintained that data can be represented in three different ways: (1) literally, by reporting the exact words uttered, (2) figuratively, by

offering an impression of what the participant said, or (3) dialogically by repeating exact conversations as they occurred. Such three-fold presentations can be used to "evoke fieldwork experiences for the readers" (Eisenhart, 2006, p. 570). In deciding how data were to be organized and interpreted, examples from the data were selected according to the six emergent themes. Interpretive commentary is used to link data to emergent themes. After transcription and initial screening, constant-comparative analysis was applied; this resulted in the confirmation of the six emergent themes then divided further into sub-themes. Major ideas were annotated in connection with related details. A winnowing process determined which ideas related to the research focus and which did not.

Table 1 highlights the six emergent themes from the analysis of the data and includes salient examples of each theme, as evidenced in the interview transcriptions.

**Table 1.** *Emergent Themes and Examples*

| Coded Theme   | Examples from Transcribed Interview   |
|---|---|
| Theme 1: Life experience details: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Life experience details</li> <li>b. Alignment between life experiences of teacher and students</li> </ul>                                     | Valerie talked early on in her interview about her own experiences in college. She noted that it had "always been a part of me that college is what you do after high school. It was never an option in my life" (personal communication, January 13, 2009).<br>Michael began his interview by saying that when he looks "at both the students in AVID class and in my other classes I'm reminded of a lot of things that I experienced when I was in school" (personal communication, January 21, 2009).     |
| Theme 2: Explicit philosophy/belief statements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. General belief statements</li> <li>b. Belief statements about AVID teaching for AVID students</li> </ul>                        | Lisa expressed her belief that "every kid can learn if they want to and I have to honestly say I truly believe that and I think we can help them get there, but they have to learn to want it and help themselves too" (personal communication, February 10, 2009).   |
| Theme 3: How life experiences and beliefs shape teaching approaches and influence conscious awareness of those beliefs.   | Chelsea noted that having both good and bad examples of teachers throughout her own education had led her to know that "there were things I definitely didn't want to do [in my own teaching]" (personal communication, January 14, 2009).  |
| Theme 4: Confirmation statements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How AVID confirms teachers' life experiences</li> <li>b. How AVID confirms teachers' beliefs</li> </ul>                                       | Michael said that he "got into AVID at the beginning because of the inequities that [he] had seen in education" and that he sees "AVID as an opportunity to make things more equitable (personal communication, January 21, 2009).  |
| Theme 5: Statements of personal agency: (how AVID teacher influences, shapes, steers, affords; teacher awareness of his/her role)   | Lisa commented that "I think the greatest impact I have on them is letting them know that they could do it no matter what. That they can, if I can do it, then they can do it" (personal communication, February 10, 2009).   |
| Theme 6: Statements of program agency: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How and what AVID does or is about</li> <li>b. Why AVID does what it does</li> <li>c. The effects and/or significance of AVID</li> </ul> | Michael shared that "we're impacting lives forever. Communities and families, families will never be the same because of the work that we're doing here and that's kind of scary, but it's great" (personal communication, February 5, 2009).<br>Evan said that "I don't know if [this particular student] could have [graduated early and gone to UCSB] without AVID and the knowledge that we had of getting her into [college] and the ways to make it happen" (personal communication, January 16, 2009). |

### 3.2. Cross-Case Analysis

Cross-case analysis shows the relative presentation of themes across a profile of the participants and provides variegation and details within the data relative to the themes presented previously. For example, although six themes emerged from the data analysis, not all themes were present with equal intention and/or frequency for each participant. The study used a small data pool of seven participants so that the amount of data collected on each participant could be rich. To mitigate the low number of participants, obtained in-depth details were obtained about each participant's life experiences and beliefs as they related to the central research focus. In order to now draw a profile of the relative importance of each coded theme, we developed a simple cross-case analysis that attempted to determine the level of significance of each theme within each interview. For example, Chelsea's responses revealed scant information about specific life details, whereas Michael spoke about a range life experience details.

There appeared to be some uniformity and enough similarity in protocol examples to justify the relative stability of each of the identified themes. This is not to say that all themes were of equal relevance to each person; however, we can state with some confidence that across the cases all six themes did bear to some degree on the central research focus. This analysis reveals how the participants exemplified and embodied educational justice in relation to their life stories and beliefs. Theme Three (how life experience details and beliefs shape teaching approaches) seemed central for most of the participants. Another theme that figured very prominently for most of the participants was Theme Six, which addressed program agency in terms of what AVID does, why AVID does what it does, and the significance and/or effect that the program has.

### 3.3. Key Findings of Classroom Observations

The classroom observations were conducted in order to triangulate the primary data gleaned through the interviews. The analysis of these data served as a strategy designed to account for how the focal elements, or themes, found in the interviews might be reflected in the teachers' day-to-day practices. Table 2 provides an example of how the observation data confirmed the primary source interview data. The table takes the two most prominent themes analyzed in all the interviews, Theme Three and Theme Six, and then provides examples of classroom observation data from each participant that exemplified these themes. The

classroom observations were also used to paint a clearer picture of the participants in the natural setting of their classrooms and to round out the case-by-case analyses.

### 3.4. Key Findings of Observations

Themes Three and six were most evident in data gathered during class observations. Theme three focuses on ... . That theme was evident in many specific instances with all of the teachers who participated in the study. For example, as seen in table ... teachers' comments and activities featured ... . Theme six focuses on ... which was also evidenced in many specific ways through classroom observations and as detailed in table ... . Specifically teachers' words and actions made it clear that they

### 3.5. Key Findings of Focus Group Discussion

Finally, the focus group discussion served as a confirmation of the emergent themes. Since not all participants were able to attend the focus group, the triangulation of these data may not hold as much weight as it would have if all seven participants had been able to engage in the discussion. Themes Three and Six again emerge as prominent within this discussion. All participants commented on their steadfast belief that their own experiences were used to consciously shaped their teaching approaches (Theme 3) and also made frequent reference to program agency – what AVID's mission is and how & why AVID is significant (Theme 6). "Michael", in connection with Theme Three, for example, stated that, "I have to believe that this kid sitting in front of me can do it... I don't care how much trouble they give me, how bad they are, what their family situation is, whether they're in a foster home or sleeping in their car or whatever; I have to believe that they can do it" (Focus Group, February 9, 2009). His comments jibe with Theme Six as he states, "At the school where I started AVID at was so anti-college and they had a select group of [honors] kids who were going to go to college. And it was understood by everybody on that campus that this group was going to college. But that's only 18% of the population and everybody seemed happy that 18% of the population was going because they, for some magic reason, were the only ones privileged enough. So the fact that we now have a program that just busts that myth wide open, you know, makes me feel happy" (Focus Group, February 9, 2009). The three other participants also expressed statements reflective of these two themes in particular.

**Table 2.** Classroom Observation Data

| Coded Name | Theme Three: restate theme six here   | Theme Six: restate theme three here   |
|------------|---|---|
| Chelsea    | <p>As students shared, Chelsea took the opportunity to interject life lessons. In one case, when a student shared that she was happy she was no longer grounded, Chelsea engaged in some dialogue with her about why she felt like she needed to sneak out of the house and how she might improve her relationships with her parents (observation, February 6, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme three noticeable here in teacher's discussion about ...</b></p>   | <p>During one class, Chelsea told her junior class "You have to, you have to take the SAT or the ACT" and a few minutes later a student said "I'm going to have a daughter and she's going to come to AVID, Ms. C. I'm going to send her here to her" (observation, January 29, 2009). Not sure how this really exemplifies theme six.</p> <p><b>Theme six noticeable here in teacher's discussion about ...</b></p>                      |
| Valerie    | <p>When a student asked if he was going to receive extra credit for doing something, Valerie responded "no, but you just get to be the good people that you are" (observation, January 15, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme three apparent here in teacher's emphasis on ...</b></p>  | <p>Imparting information relevant to college applications and financial aid. At the end of the class period on the day she went over the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), students surrounded her desk to ask her specific and individualized questions about their FAFSA applications (observation, January 16, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme six apparent here in teacher's emphasis on ...</b></p>                           |
| Michael    | <p>Evidence of Michael's belief in a sense of family community during observations: e.g. on a day that a new student enrolled in the AVID class, Michael introduced her to the class by saying "you have been adopted into our AVID family" (observation, January 26, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme three evident here in teacher's comments about ...</b></p>   | <p>Work with laptop computers to log onto the Cal State University (CSU) Mentor site to input grades from the first semester into their files. Michael also noted that "you have friends who aren't in AVID and it would be a good idea to help them set up CSU mentor site and get to college. It's good to help other people" (observation, January 28, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme six evident here in teacher's comments about ...</b></p> |
|            | Theme Three cont'd  | Theme Six cont'd  |
| Betty      | <p>During one lecture, Betty had this to say: "I'm not saying you're not as smart as other kids, but I'm saying you don't have all the same advantages. The test is not the only measure of what you're worth... it's a whole package. Those test scores are important, but it's not going to be a deal breaker. I don't want anyone having a meltdown. Go and do the best you can" (observation, January 23, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme three revealed here in teacher's words about</b></p>                 | <p>A lecture with freshman class on the UC vs. CSU college entrance requirements (observation, January 23, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme six revealed here in teacher's words about</b></p>  |
| Victoria   | <p>On one of the days that I visited her class, Victoria actually had her MLA handbook with her and was telling the students about buying it and using it in her own education. She joked that her version might be a bit outdated, but... important to her (observation, January 22, 2009). <b>Theme three evident here in teacher's focus on</b></p>  | <p>Framed conversations with students around college requirements, telling them that "you know, the better grades, the more [colleges] you could probably choose from" (observation, January 22, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme six evident here in teacher's focus on</b></p>  |
| Evan       | <p>During one tutorial, Evan said "Oh my gosh, don't tell her the answer! Make her use her brain" and then later said, "let's not give him the answer; let's guide him" (observation, January 27, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme three evident here in teacher's emphasis on</b></p>  | <p>Problem-solving strategies: Teacher also told students that they were all "winners in his book," (observation, January 27, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme six evident here in teacher's emphasis on</b></p>  |
| Lisa       | <p>Evidence of Lisa's emphasis on connection between education and the "real world." A student said he wanted to be a professional athlete and she told him that "only one percent of the entire society goes on to play professional sports... I'm just telling you the reality. If you don't have education or grades to back it up... I think it should be your education that comes first" (observation, January 30, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme three exemplified here in teacher's comment about</b></p> | <p><b>Need some phrase that identifies a core aspect of theme six here, followed by what is below</b></p> <p>Lisa ended a tutorial session by saying "that's what tutorials are all about – being able to understand. Sometimes people learn better when others show them" (observation, February 3, 2009).</p> <p><b>Theme six exemplified here in teacher's comment about</b></p>   |

## 4. Summary and Discussion

The data have provided a detailed representation of how teacher beliefs about educational justice have been revealed through the three data sources. The participants were ideal candidates for the study because they have had particular life experiences relative to an educational justice context. In light of the current body of literature on teachers' beliefs and life experiences, the data provided pictures of in-depth, authentic situations that merged into a distinct portrait of how educational communities might further their understandings about the importance of teachers' life experiences and beliefs to their classroom practices and interactions with students. The pre-observation interviews illustrated that teachers' beliefs and life stories do inform their teaching practices, influencing them to create more educationally just classroom contexts. AVID teachers also align themselves closely with the program's agency. The data further revealed parallels between the data analysis and the key tenets of educational justice. The researcher's observations of the teachers' classroom contexts and the focus group discussion proved to be confirmatory in nature in that the data collected via these two avenues aligned themselves with the primary source data obtained from the interviews.

The research findings are significant to the key theoretical premises about voice and story as they are linked to beliefs about educational justice within the specific setting of AVID teachers' lives. The six themes that emerged relative to the data collected illuminate core tenets of educational justice theories. For example, these themes have contributed to the existing body of literature on life stories and beliefs in that they have given voice to what has been presented largely in terms of theoretical constructs.

## 5. Conclusion

In the current climate of educational reform, much emphasis is placed on standardized testing and quantitative accountability measures as evidence of student and school successes and failures. By looking more closely at teachers, such as the seven highlighted in this study, who live and breathe the work of educational justice in their classrooms everyday, this case study research has been able to shed some light on the ways in which teachers' life experiences and beliefs matter in education. They matter because teachers genuinely believe that who they are impacts what they do; they believe they can foster classroom environments that are caring, democratic, and educationally just. What is unique about effective AVID teachers is that they are working within and supported by the framework of a program the tenets of which align themselves with many of the components of educational justice and critical pedagogy, as previous literature has suggested. The qualitative case study methodology allowed the researcher to spend time in the field with the participants, both listening to their stories and professed beliefs and then seeing confirmation of these

stories and beliefs through the context of their classroom practice.

Examining the impact of teacher beliefs and the reflection of these beliefs in classroom practice is an important step toward achieving lasting change in our schools. When teachers impact traditionally underserved students, the educational justice element of such influence is brought to the forefront (Warren, 2002). There is a need to recognize that quality of teachers, including the beliefs that these teachers hold, greatly impacts student academic and personal achievement in schools. There is also a need to work to develop more quality teacher preparation programs that create open spaces for communicating and developing community alongside the teaching of content, pedagogy, and curriculum (Delpit, 1996; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998; Strong-Wilson, 2008; Warren, 2002). Likewise, creating spaces where teachers can share their stories and examine their own beliefs may prove beneficial in increasing the teachers' efficacy as educators working to provide educationally just opportunities for their students. Listening to teachers' life stories and beliefs should be a starting point toward such recognitions.

As previous research has noted, teachers' stories are aligned with critical pedagogy because critical pedagogy must be structured around teachers' and students' stories, voices, and the implications of the experiences that shape these voices. This case study might contribute to the conversations about listening to, deconstructing, reconstructing, honoring, and continuing to create both the individual and collective voices of teachers as educators work toward a more critically conscious, educationally just educational system.

The desire to examine the stories of teachers and the roles they play in advancing the AVID program mission and in contributing to the post-secondary opportunities of AVID students arose, in part, because of the lack of existing research in this particular area. Although studies have focused both quantitative and qualitative research on the effectiveness of the AVID program and on students within this program, and although there is ample evidence to show that the program works, little attention has been paid to (a) the life stories of teachers and (b) how teachers shape their beliefs about their roles as AVID teachers. Yet, this present case study has shown that such in-depth research might contribute to a more complete picture of the kinds of cultural and structural changes needed to improve the educational opportunities of traditionally underserved students. Likewise, examining the level of ideological awareness of teachers related to issues of educational justice is one important step toward defining what educational justice is and what it looks like in the everyday construct of the classroom. Another potentially significant aspect of this study is that the researcher not only sought to look at the existing structure of the AVID program, but also questioned and observed the deeper levels of connection AVID teachers have to their own life experiences and beliefs.

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