Investigating Social Justice Understanding through Student Writing Samples: an Emergent Theme Analysis Approach

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Abstract

This study describes student understanding of social justice. 61 students from three cross-disciplinary courses at a northwest Jesuit university were asked to respond to two social justice writing prompts. These written responses were qualitatively analyzed and interpreted using an emergent theme protocol. Five main themes emerged from the data: equality, service, action/change, ethical framework, and responsibility. These themes and an analysis of student definitions of social justice are displayed to illustrate a range of student understanding. The relationship between selected themes and components of the university’s social justice outcomes is also described.

Key Words: social justice, student understanding, writing prompts, qualitative research, assessment, emergent theme analysis.
Introduction and Background

Measuring the level of student understanding of social justice presents a challenge. However, because Jesuit universities, among others, incorporate education for social justice in their mission statements and core curricula, and given the movements toward outcomes-based assessment and rigorous accreditation criteria, new methods are required to describe and assess social justice understanding. This research project qualitatively describes the beliefs 61 students, focusing on their concept of social justice. The characteristics that emerge in this description include a range of student responses that could form the basis of an assessment tool for this central mission outcome.

Funded by a Teagle Foundation grant, a small Jesuit institution recently explored outcomes driven social justice (SJ) education. As one would expect at a Jesuit university, social justice is an important part of the ethos and Ignatian identity. According to the mission statement, the University develops students who possess “a thirst for justice.” A committee was created that spanned the curriculum and co-curriculum. The committee proposed a definition of social justice as well as SJ learning outcomes. The definition of social justice education proposed by the University’s Social Justice Committee is as follows:

Social justice education begins with engaging students in the reality of suffering in the human condition, including environmental abuse and the violence that both results from and fosters social injustice; it seeks to awaken a profound empathy and sense of solidarity with those who are victims of unjust decisions, actions and structures, and to provide the critical disciplinary training necessary to understand and combat that injustice; and it attempts to inculcate the requisite habits of mind that lead to appropriate actions in the service of improving the lived experience of all human beings, locally and globally.

In addition to the definition of SJ, the committee also proposed the following SJ learning outcomes for the University. The success of educating for SJ would be seen in graduates who:
1) Demonstrate self-reflective awareness of themselves and their relationships with others.

2) Demonstrate consciousness of others' distress and a desire to alleviate it.

3) Demonstrate a sense of right and wrong rooted in justifiable ethical principles.

4) Can analyze factors contributing to human suffering and social injustice.

5) Can apply collaborative problem solving skills to social injustice situations.

6) Can apply disciplinary skills and interdisciplinary knowledge to social justice issues.

7) Are committed to non-violent solutions.

8) Demonstrate a growth in maturity of understanding and actions over the course of their education.

The University believes that social justice is a critical component of education. As with all admirable mission statements and university outcomes, there exists often an unexamined gray area between the ideal and the real--i.e., what the university hopes to imbue in students and what it actually achieves in students by graduation. A team of three professors (School of Business, College of Arts and Sciences [English], and School of Education) developed a research plan with the goal of describing how students understand SJ across different university disciplines. By gathering and analyzing student perceptions of SJ, the researchers hope to gain a baseline of actual student perceptions about social justice.

**Review of Literature**

Discussions of social justice often cite the writings of John Locke and David Hume as foundational premises for social justice. Their writings address issues of respect for property, distribution of societal benefits, equal access, economic inequality, and mutually beneficial cooperation, which predates the 20th century formation of social justice as a cohesive subject of inquiry (Clayton, M. & Williams, 3004, p. 21-46). Rawls' seminal work did much to further and clarify social justice as a social and political issue. His influential *A Theory of Justice* (1971) states, "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override" (p. 3). Rawls' basic principles were: freedom
of thought, association and movement, political, relational and personal liberty, and rights covered by the rule of law.

Social justice can also trace its historical roots to Catholic theology, with its emphasis on serving the poor and underprivileged. The term “social justice” is attributed to Jesuit Priest Luigi Taparelli in the 1840s, who believed that economic systems neglected the poor. This is echoed by the Church’s teachings that through words, prayers and deeds one must show solidarity with, and compassion for, the poor, based on the belief that the moral test of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.

Social justice has been used to describe the movement towards a socially just world. In this context, SJ is based on the concepts of human rights and equality, and can be defined as “the way in which human rights are manifested in the everyday lives of people at every level of society” (“social justice”). Current social and political issues of global warming, environmental sensitivity, third world hunger, lack of water resources, slavery, and political oppression are increasingly labeled “social justice” issues as articulated by the United Nations (social justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations, 2006).

Teaching for social justice has developed into an educational philosophy. Early in the 20th Century, John Dewey in his Democracy in Education (1916) and civil rights activist and writer W.E.B. Du Bois both advocated for schools that fostered justice for all. They along with recent activists Paulo Freire (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1971), Jonathan Kozol (Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation, 1995), and Alfie Kohn (The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools, 2000), champion the cause of the underprivileged.

Social justice pedagogy within higher education has resulted in a less defined body of research. Thomas Tritton (2008) states that “there has been little coordination or consensus among colleges pursuing social justice goals. Nor is there a well-developed base of scholarship on the definitions, objectives, and outcomes of such endeavors” (Teaching social justice in Higher Education). Tritton’s comments seem to reflect the nature of SJ education at secular universities, while a review of the literature surrounding
Catholic and Jesuit universities uncovers clearly articulated mission statements and core curriculum requirements around SJ outcomes. The Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, states that “Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States [should] express faith-filled concern for justice in what they are as Christian academies of higher learning, in what their faculty do, and in what their students become” (1989).

The literature on how to teach social justice shows that this is a complicated endeavor. The question of how to teach social justice is affected by student age and maturity, degree of curricular emphasis, subject matter content, intended outcomes, level of institutional support, and competing political agendas. Among the many online, periodical and text-based resources, the following three offer K-12 teachers and university professors both theoretical support and practical classroom ideas and activities. (1) Ayers, Hunt and Quinn’s *Teaching for social justice: A Democracy and Education Reader* (1989) offers 21 chapters on a host of social justice approaches as well as an afterword of five “Activist Forums,” 48 book resources, 15 classroom resources, 27 resource organizations, 24 periodicals, 5 educational institutes, and 11 World Wide Web sites for further information. (2) Pat Russo (2006) in his resource packet titled, “What Does It Mean to Teach for social justice?” scripts 24 pages of classroom ideas that address oppression, injustice in the world, racism, classism, sexism, ableism and heterosexism. (3) Adams, Dell & Griffen’s *Teaching for Diversity and social justice* (1997) provides a unified framework by which students can engage and critically analyze several forms of social oppression including: racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and ableism. This 374 page book provides a blend of theory and instructional support to be used as a primary or supplementary course text.

Assessing social justice outcomes is more challenging than simply testing for student content knowledge. According to Bringle, Phillips & Hudson (2004), measurement of attitudes, moral development, and levels of critical thinking requires multiple instrumentation across the affective and cognitive domains. Their *Measure of Service Learning* (2004), though focused on service learning research, articulates a rationale and methodology for measuring and assessing motives, values and attitudes. A study by Wang, et.al. (2005) attempts to quantitatively measure four dimensions of service-learning courses: personal
competence, interpersonal relationship, charitable responsibility, and social justice responsibility. Specifically assessing social justice outcomes, Mayhew and Fernandez (2007) focused on pedagogical practices. Their research question, “How do the pedagogical practices of courses emphasizing social justice content contribute to social justice learning?”, relied on a self-report study that gathered student perceptions of SJ learning at the end of their courses. The instrument they used, “The Measure of Classroom Moral Practices,” provided information on “attitudes and perceptions of educational practices most conducive to facilitating the development of moral reasoning and social justice learning in a classroom context” (p. 65). Nagda, Gurin & Lopez (2003) explored the question, “By what processes does multicultural learning take place?” (p.189) using pre- and post-test questionnaires that framed items from a variety of scales in order to assess learning outcomes related to “cognitive complexity . . . and democracy outcomes” (p.173). A set of questions in the post-test inquired about students’ own assessment of their learning outcomes (p.173).

Padgett (2008) encourages multiple qualitative methods to gain insight into the uneven terrain of affective response research given the complexity of assessing feelings, attitudes, values, and emotions. While advocating for rigorous routines and conscientious oversight, Padgett believes that qualitative methods for social science research have never been more powerful or flexible for the researcher.

**Research Question and Research Methodology**

The central, driving question of this research project is “What does social justice understanding look like?” Corollary questions include “How do we recognize different levels of student understanding of social justice?” and “How are we going to assess students’ social justice understanding in order to improve the University curriculum?” This research project represents a beginning effort to answer these questions. Unlike the previously mentioned studies (Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007 and Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003) which focused on students’ self-reporting of their understanding levels, the researchers of this study have chosen a qualitative approach: collecting, analyzing, and interpreting student written responses in an attempt to describe student understanding.
A host of qualitative models that focus on social justice teaching are available for studying students’ affective perceptions as well as cognitive understandings in higher education (Creswell, 2009; Russell & Weaver, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Weis, & Fine, 2000; Atweh, B., Kemmis, S., & Weeks, P., 1998). Among the multiple qualitative methodologies employed, Charmaz (2005) points out that “grounded theory methods are a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build inductive middle-range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development. A major strength of grounded theory methods is that they provide tools for analyzing processes, and these tools hold much potential for studying social justice issues” (p. 507).

An emergent theme analysis approach to arrive at grounded theory was employed in this research study, which analyzed a data set of 61 student written samples on social justice. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), “Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the ‘reality’ than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation. Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (p. 12). The methodology employed the five major components of the grounded theory approach which Strauss and Corbin outline: (a) collecting the data (interviews, observations or documents), (b) organizing the data for processing, (c) coding the data to conceptualize emerging meaning, (d) analyzing the data for emergent themes, and, (d) interpretation of findings. In addition, qualitative inquiry according to Patton (1990) is a blend of critical and creative probing that needs to be open to multiple possibilities while using nonlinear forms of thinking such as going back and forth over the data to generate creative perspectives (pp. 434-35).

The sample size of 61 students included all students within three courses taught by the researchers: (1) Global Economic Issues (Business, Junior/Senior level), (2) Introduction to Literature (Arts and Sciences, Freshman Level), (3) Secondary Teaching Strategies (Education, Freshman/Sophomore level). This convenience sampling limited the researchers’ ability to generalize results beyond the targeted population. Nevertheless, the population provided a cross-section of student classes (freshman to senior).
and a reasonable expectation of a mix of responses, leading to a more probable response variance and thus a richer data set to code, analyze, and interpret.

To gather evidence of what student understanding of social justice looks like, a reflection essay was embedded in all three courses. Student essay directions:

*You have 30 minutes to respond to the following two questions. Take several minutes to consider both prompts (below), organize your thinking, and craft a specific and detailed response for each. You will need a minimum of three well-developed paragraphs (total) to respond fully. Think of your classmates and instructor as your audience. Be honest. Instead of telling us what you think we want to hear, demonstrate your personal voice and your critical thinking, illustrated with examples from your experiences.*

**Prompt #1:** How would you define social justice?

**Prompt #2:** In what specific ways have your experiences or your education shaped this definition? Illustrate with at least two personally significant moments or experiences that influenced your understanding of social justice in action.

After the 61 essays were collected the researchers met to review the qualitative research methodology. Out of this initial meeting a three step action plan was created.

**Step 1:** Together the researchers read a random set of five essays in order to discuss, code, analyze, and interpret methodological behaviors. This initial “open forum” sharpened the qualitative procedures and encouraged methodological consistency. The researchers discussed issues, clarified qualitative methods, and established a common research vocabulary. Particular to this first step was a review of Miller and Vanni’s (2005) joint-probability of agreement methodology in assessing narrative responses as a means of achieving an acceptable level of rate reliability. This approach assesses response clarity on a numerical scale of 0-3: 0=meaning of section is not decipherable even after some reflection, 1=meaning
of part of the section is clear after some reflection, \(2=\) meaning of entire section is clear after some reflection, \(3=\) meaning of entire section is perfectly clear on first reading (p. 127). This numerical process was used to determine salient themes and emerging student descriptors by accepting only data that received an aggregate score of 2.0 and above.

Step 2: With chronologically numbered essays each researcher read and color-coded all essays for emerging themes with corresponding response clarity values (0-3 pts.).

Step 3: The researchers met to process initial codings, response clarity numbers and thematic discoveries. Through conversations about coding differences and selection inconsistencies a dominant terminology was settled upon. Discussion and negotiation led to consensus when response clarity values exceeded 2.0. Five themes emerged out of the nine proposed among three researchers: ethical framework (2.6), equality (3), action/change (2.3), service (3), and level of responsibility (2.3). Other themes that had been identified early on were discarded through this confirming/disconfirming, discussion based process and the joint probability of agreement methodology.

**Research Analysis**

The essays presented student perceptions of how social justice is defined (Prompt 1), but the analysis also revealed repeating characteristics of their understanding of SJ. These are referred to as emergent themes: equality, service, action/change, ethical framework, and responsibility. The following tables organize the data according to the differences among the responses that emerged within students’ definitions (Table 1) and within the five emergent themes (Tables 2-6). Following a brief analysis of students’ definitions of SJ, the themes that emerged are presented in order of the frequency with which they occurred. For most themes, these differences are displayed as ranges of student understanding of SJ. The interpretive decision making process used to place the responses in categories was based on the researchers’ agreed upon working definition of social justice, the university outcomes for SJ, and rigorous emergent theme methodology.
Definition of Social Justice

The first section of the writing prompt explicitly asks for a definition of social justice. As detailed in the literature review, there are many complementary definitions of SJ. While Wikipedia is not accepted as an authoritative source, it was useful because its collaboratively produced entries reflect a generally held contemporary conception of the meaning of social justice. For the analysis in this section, students were considered “able to define social justice” if their responses included one or more of the following terms or concepts cited in the Wikipedia definition: justice, fair treatment, shared benefits, advantages, equality, equal opportunity, or human rights (“social justice”1). Given this working definition, this set of responses can be sorted according to their precision, from those containing confused or vague definitions to those using more precise designations.

As shown in Table 1, 18 students were not able to define social justice, gave definitions which indicated no grasp of the subject, or provided definitions which were incoherent. 43 students were able to define SJ in terms of at least one basic concept of SJ. Of the 43, seven students were able to give more developed definitions which were not only based on at least one basic SJ concept, but were also more precise and related their definition to a specific SJ problem, an instance of injustice, or the victims of injustice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic (43/61 displayed some form of this characteristic)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</table>
| Limited grasp of the concept of social justice (18/61)           | • Social justice is the justified means of treatment or actions of a person in society in response to a situation.  
• Maintaining a positive community that intends to eliminate deviance whenever present is the underlying meaning of social justice. |
| Defines in terms of at least one basic concept of social justice (36/61) | • Social justice is . . . doing our best to treat all of our peers with the same respect and ensure that the same opportunities are presented to each and every person in a particular social setting. |
| Identifies specific social justice problem, types of social injustice, or targets of social injustice (7/61) | • My personal definition of social justice is the act of striving for equality of all, including breaking the boundaries of race, economic status, disability, gender, or any other fabricated limits our society still honors. There are steps that have been taken to rectify the situation, but I still feel that we have a long way to go. |

1 See Appendix
Over half of the respondents (33 out of 61) understood social justice in terms of equality, and this was expressed through phrases such as "equal opportunity," "equal rights," "same freedoms," and "equal treatment." In simple terms, students discussed SJ as equality in terms of who is involved, what the issues of equality are, and how equality is achieved.

### Table 2: Equality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic (33/61 displayed some form of this characteristic)</th>
<th>Approval (33/61)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who is involved in SJ as equality? (23/33)</strong></td>
<td>This awareness will shed a light on our societies injustices and help to equalize all of us the way that god intended. We are all human and we all deserve the same opportunities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In order for social justice to exist, every person should have the same rights and opportunities available to them... [My Father] taught me that every person in this world deserves a fair shot at what they want most in life... He showed me that every person has the right to pursue &amp; maintain their own health &amp; happiness, and that most importantly, social justice comes from watching those around us, and working together to find the most ideal situation for everyone involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social justice can be defined as equality brought on by those a little more fortunate to those who happen to be unfortunate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is an example of inequality? (12/33)</strong></td>
<td>Social justice is the act of striving for equality of all, including breaking the boundaries of race, economic status, disability, gender, or any other fabricated limits our society still honors. There are steps that have been taken to rectify the situation, but I still feel that we have a long way to go... Though conservative historically, [this university] has made many attempts to raise awareness of diversity on campus. This is the first step towards equality and social justice.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In my opinion, it sounds like treating everyone fairly in a society. Social justice could apply to civil rights, racial differences, or even playground rules. In all three situations, social justice all boils down to fairness based on equality. In a socially just world, there would be no rich or poor, powerful or weak, cool or uncool. People would not be judged by gender, race or popularity, but rather by how they live their lives or the experiences they have gone through.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How is equality achieved? (5/33)</strong></td>
<td>Raising awareness of diversity is the first step towards equality and social justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social justice in many ways is the challenging of established societal values or customs in order to achieve a certain kind of equality and freedom for everyone within a society. Social justice is not simply a monetary issue. Social justice rather is a value issue, [an] issue where standards, personal freedoms and equality is much more important.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

23 students indicated either to whom equality should be extended using phrases such as “even poor families” or “all American citizens” or by whom equality should be extended: “equality brought on by those
a little more fortunate to those who happen to be unfortunate.” 15 students explained what SJ as equality meant by giving specific examples or types of inequalities, for example, “gender,” “economic status,” “education,” and “race.” 6 students who understood SJ as equality mentioned how equality is achieved, as in this example: “raising awareness of diversity is the first step toward equality and SJ.” While the categories outlined here describe how the essays in this set differ from one another, there is no apparent correspondence between the categories and varying levels of understanding.

Service

The second most common theme emerging from this set of essays was Service, with 21 students characterizing their understanding of social justice through describing participation in service activities. Definitions provided by the National Council on Service Learning differentiated between volunteerism and Service Learning which were helpful in distinguishing the range of ideas about service that is illustrated in Table 3.²

² To help distinguish among the three different types of service, the following criteria, established by the National Commission on Service learning were consulted:

Service-learning:

- Links to academic content and standards
- Is reciprocal in nature, benefiting both the community and the service providers by combining a service experience with a learning experience
- Can be used in any subject area so long as it is appropriate to learning goal

Service-learning is not:

- An episodic volunteer program
- An add-on to an existing school or college curriculum
- Logging a set number of community service hours in order to graduate
- Compensatory service assigned as a form of punishment by the courts or by school administrators
- One-sided: benefiting only students or only the community
The category “Community Service” includes 11 of the 21 students who described their understanding of social justice by citing an experience volunteering in the community or on a mission trip. For some volunteers serving was an altruistic act, yet for others it had been required by an organization, curriculum or family tradition. In the second category, “Community Service Plus,” 4 students not only described the community service they had provided but also acknowledged that it had exposed them to real-world situations they had not previously experienced. One student, for example, was “awestruck by the severe level of poverty,” while another’s high school service project “opened [her] eyes to the disabled.” However, these students stopped short of reflection. A third variation in the meaning of “service” was evident in the essays of 6 students who linked service to a lesson learned or self-discovery. The essays in the category “Service Learning” included comments such as “made me see I have a social
responsibility to help,” and “made me realize that social justice was . . . working actively to change the ways of society so that it is more accepting to all people.” This subset of the essays thus shows variation in the degree to which the service that influenced the student’s understanding of SJ was transformative.

### Action/Change

A theme that emerged in over one-third (23 out of 61) of the essays is that social justice involves change or action. These reflections may have been elicited by this portion of the prompt: “In what specific ways have your experiences or your education shaped this definition? Illustrate with at least two personally significant moments or experiences that influenced your understanding of social justice in action.” As Table 4 illustrates, among the students whose understanding of SJ included the concept that SJ involves change or action, three different types of responses emerged. 11 students expressed a general sense that social justice requires action or change, while 12 of the students expressed concretely that SJ requires action.

### Table 4: Social Justice Requires Action or Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic (23/61 displayed some form of this characteristic)</th>
<th>General sense that social justice requires action (11/23)</th>
<th>Express concretely that social justice requires action (12/23)</th>
<th>Mention concrete acts or actors (7/12)</th>
<th>Achieving social justice requires changing society (5/12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I think in order for there to be justice, there must be more awareness, and until more people acknowledge more of the changes that need to be made, we are still limited in our thinking and acting.</td>
<td>• First, we must all come to an understanding that justice for all can be achieved &amp; then we must work together for it. • Social justice is the act of one or more people that protect the rights of another person or group of people.</td>
<td>• Social justice is . . . an attempt to strive for societal fairness and equality. . . . Make sure that they have solid education systems to work through and the medical care required to be healthy. • Whether a person is serving food or protesting for the common good, social justice is for everywhere.</td>
<td>• I hope to one day have the ability to strongly affect some political institutions and help orient more efforts into understanding and practicing social justice on a larger scale. • Social justice in many ways is the challenging of established societal values or customs in order to achieve a certain kind of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- I was taught and encouraged to realize and then battle injustices of the world. This meant getting involved in local homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and tutoring those younger than me who needed help.

- Social justice has to be action directed at resolving the root cause of a societal problem.

equality and freedom for everyone within a society.

The 11 students who expressed only a general sense that social justice requires action used generalizations to express the idea that SJ means “doing something.” They used some form of the words, “action” or “change,” however, their description of this concept remained abstract.

Using a scale that distinguishes between general and specific, a second category comprises twelve essays that more directly expressed the idea that SJ requires action. 7 students mention concrete acts/actors. These students understood SJ to mean “doing something,” but they gave examples of SJ requiring action and mentioned concrete acts of SJ that they had participated in, witnessed, or would like to see occur. Their understanding of SJ included the idea that there is something wrong as indicated by phrases such as “fighting for that improvement” or “fight for fairness.” Further, some felt an injustice needed to be changed, as indicated in phrases such as “attempting to reverse the injustice” or “righting the wrongs.”

Yet 5 of the students went further by articulating the idea that achieving social justice requires changing society. They explicitly stated that SJ requires engaging with social institutions and values and conveyed the need to target the systemic source of the injustice, using phrases such as these: “strongly affect some political institutions,” “challenging of established societal values,” “action directed at resolving the root cause of a societal problem,” and “changing mindsets.”
Social Justice Based on Ethical Framework

As outlined in Table 5, another theme that emerged was that social justice is related to some standard of behavior or decision-making. In this “Ethical Framework” category, there were variations in the degree to which students demonstrated a grasp of the ethical or moral underpinnings of SJ. Generally speaking, many students (22 out of 61) did not ground their reflections on social justice upon a standard of behavior at all, while those who did differed in what they understood to be the source of that standard.

Of the 39 students who referred to some basis for social justice, 21 of them expressed the idea that SJ is based, not upon ethics, but upon laws, rules, or some general concept of right and wrong or good and bad. On the other hand, 18 of the 39 students expressed the idea that SJ is based upon some ethical standard. Of these 18 students, 9 referred to an ethical standard but were not always clear about what this concept was, while 9 understood SJ to be the application of ethical standards associated with religion.

In the 21 essays in the first category in Table 5, the most frequent words used to characterize social justice were “right” and “wrong,” as demonstrated by the phrases, “when you do something wrong” and “do the right thing.” However, the responses in this category did not distinguish how right and wrong are determined or the students were vague about such a determination. Thus, one student wrote, “These rules are built on what humans inherently believe is a good and sound way of living.” This category included students who did not distinguish between social justice and legal justice. In several of the essays, “punishment” was a primary theme.
Table 5: Social Justice Based on Ethical Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic (39/61 displayed some form of this characteristic)</th>
<th>Source of Ethical Standard is Varied (9/18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| social justice is based on rules, laws, or right and wrong (21/39) | • Justice, being synonymous with morally and/or ethically correct, is what betters our humane society—separates us from the irrational animals.  
• I would compare social justice to the Golden Rule of “treat others how you would like to be treated . . . for me social justice is a higher form of the Golden Rule.  
• The definition of social justice is to have a system in which all peoples are treated fair and just. |
| social justice is based on an ethical standard (18/39) | Source of Ethical Standard is Religion (9/18) |
| | • This awareness will shed a light on our society’s injustices and help to equalize all of us the way that god intended . . . . At Jesuit High School, community service was part of our curriculum and was a way to become “a man for others.  
• As Christians, the message of Jesus is the foundation of the definition of social justice.  
• Raised in a Catholic environment, I have been taught to practice charity from a very young age. |

Of the 18 students who understood social justice to be an application of some ethical standard, 9 mentioned an ethical standard that was not explicitly linked to a religious belief. Most of these students referred only generally to “morality” or “ethics,” as in the first example: “Justice, being synonymous with morally and/or ethically correct, is what betters our humane society—separates us from the irrational animals.” The Golden Rule was the most specific formulation of an ethical standard in this category. Other students referred obliquely to the idea of equal and fair treatment, or the concept that all people have certain moral rights.

The other 9 students who understood social justice to be based upon some ethical standard associated this standard with religion specifically, Christianity. In their reflections, these students referred to God, Jesus, Christianity, Catholicism, or the Jesuit objective of forming “men and women for others.”
majority of responses in this category refer to Catholic or specifically Jesuit teachings, students’ responses along these lines were probably triggered by the portion of the prompt asking, “In what specific ways have your experiences or your education shaped this definition” and directing them to “[i]llustrate with at least two personally significant moments or experiences that influenced your understanding of social justice in action.”

**Individual Responsibility for Social Justice**

The final theme emerged in only 9 of the 63 essays. The prompt did not directly ask students to articulate where responsibility lies for creating social justice, though it did direct them to consider their experience as individuals. However, as Table 6 illustrates, the understanding of SJ that several students articulated includes the idea that it is individuals who have the responsibility for bringing about social justice.

**Table 6: Responsibility for Social Justice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Directly</th>
<th>Indirectly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Individual is responsible for SJ (9/61) | - Through these courses I realized the amount of effort, work, labor, and resources that amounted to my lifestyle and common needs was massive. I began to notice my usual habits and found I was being very wasteful and selfish… It astounded me and I started to try and give as much as I take.” | - I would define social justice as interpreting, acting, and living every situation that is the best for others, not necessarily yourself.  
- Yes, we are given our own rights and opportunities, but I believe true social justice will be achieved when we can make decisions for our own self-interest in accordance with all the people around us. |

Of the 9 students incorporating this idea, 6 described this idea directly, as in “we can make decisions for our own self-interest in accordance with all the people around us.” Three expressed this idea directly: “what I can do to help others.” No significant difference emerged in the responses of students who expressed the sense of individual responsibility.
Discussion

According to this data, a variance in responses is suggested in both the students’ definitions and four of the five emergent themes. With the exception of the category “Individual Responsibility,” differences among the student essays reveal various dimensions of their understanding of SJ, and in some of these categories, the differences might be linked to degree of understanding.

- The students who expressed an understanding of SJ that involved service varied in their ability to explain the relationship of service to SJ and in the degree to which service raised awareness or led to the student experiencing change.
- Variations in the essays asserting that SJ requires action or change included the degree to which students were specific about required actions, with some students introducing the further notion that to bring about SJ requires engaging in systemic change.
- Students who related SJ to some standard of behavior variously identified laws, rules, or religion as the source of determining right and wrong.

These variations suggest the possibility of developing an evaluation tool for measuring a range of understanding in these areas.

The data also revealed a relationship between student understanding of social justice and the University’s institutional SJ goals. The distinguishing traits of these students’ understanding of social justice do relate to the following proposed SJ outcomes:

- Demonstrate self-reflective awareness of themselves and their relationships with others
- Demonstrate consciousness of others’ distress and a desire to alleviate it
- Demonstrate a sense of right and wrong rooted in justifiable ethical principles
- Demonstrate a growth in maturity of understanding and actions over the course of their education
Table 7 shows how some of the emergent themes and sample data provide evidence of the proposed SJ outcomes. This analysis suggests that social justice outcomes can be measured.

### Table 7: Institutional Goals and Emergent Themes

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<th>Proposed SJ Outcome</th>
<th>Emergent Theme and Sample Data</th>
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| Demonstrate self-reflective awareness of themselves and their relationships with others | **Equality Theme: awareness of others & actors/agents**  
- “That’s what social [justice] means to me; making sure everyone always has a chance and has help”  
- “[S]ocial justice can only be achieved when those people with higher rank and opportunities decide to help those who are not so fortunate.” |
| Demonstrate consciousness of others’ distress… | **Service Theme: community service plus & service learning**  
- “Two weeks before I came to [this university] I was privileged to go on a mission trip to the island country of Haiti. I was expecting the worst, I knew that it was the third poorest country in the world, after all, but despite this knowledge I was still awestruck by the severe level of poverty that virtually everyone lives in.”  
- “My youth group leader and a friend of mine showed me a video of life in and around New Orleans and it was horrible. So together with my youth group we started a nonprofit called Shirt Across America. We sell t-shirts to help rebuild homes on the gulf coast.” |
| …and a desire to alleviate it: | **Action/Change: achieving SJ requires changing society**  
- “I think the social justice that I would like to work for is to grant every child the resources necessary to be a successful adult. Make sure that they have solid education systems to work through and the medical care required to be healthy.”  
- “In becoming active in politics I have personally realized that a major reason I want to study law is that in the future I hope to one day have the ability to strongly affect some political institutions and help orient more efforts into understanding practicing social justice on a larger scale.” |
| Demonstrate a sense of right and wrong rooted in justifiable ethical principles | **Social justice is Based on an Ethical Framework**  
- “One of the mantras of Jesuit schools everywhere is “being men and women for others” and that mantra has become quite impactful on my own life. It has spurred me and motivated me to stand up on certain issues and most importantly involve myself in activities that have been extremely impactful on me and others.” |
| Demonstrate a growth in maturity of understanding and actions over the course of their education | **Service: Service Learning**  
- “By working with these kids, I have formed an understanding of their world and from this I have learned how they have been “wronged” and have tried to help fix this. Although poor, what these kids need & want most is my time, not my money.” |
Conclusion

While the University has defined what it means by social justice education and has proposed what its outcomes would be, as of yet, there is no way of measuring success in achieving the proposed outcomes. How is an understanding of social justice represented in the learner? This research project provides a partial answer. Using emergent theme analysis of reflection essays, 61 university students’ perceptions of social justice were qualitatively described. Through collecting, qualitatively analyzing, and interpreting their responses, different dimensions of student understanding of social justice were acknowledged. After comparing these results to the institution’s proposed social justice learning outcomes, it is evident that this line of reasoning holds promise for improving the University’s social justice curriculum both in general and for the teachers’ individual social justice courses.

Future Research

The goal of this project was to describe how students understand social justice in different university disciplines. Future research may focus on selecting university outcomes for social justice and designing a pilot evaluative rubric to assess levels of students’ understanding of social justice. The next logical step would be to utilize the social justice rubric across the curriculum. This could include the assessment of social justice understanding across the curriculum and examining growth in student social justice understanding through a pre-post, treatment-based methodology.
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