

# Predictors of Social Justice: Critical Thinking Disposition and Student Personal Responsibility

Filiz Gültekin<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The increase in diversity in society and, thus, in schools brings the possibility of an increase in the number of students exposed to prejudice and discrimination due to their differences. Therefore, there is a need for teachers who can support students' perceptions of social justice. This study examines the predictive power of critical thinking disposition and student personal responsibility on social justice attitudes in prospective social studies teacher. 341 students from universities in various cities of Turkey participated in the study. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to analyze the data. The results showed that critical thinking disposition predicted social justice, while student personal responsibility did not have a significant effect. The study's results underline the importance of increasing critical thinking disposition to increase students' social justice attitudes. It is necessary to include critical thinking disposition development in studies on social justice.

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### Keywords:

Social justice, critical thinking disposition, student personal responsibility, prospective social studies teacher

## INTRODUCTION

The world is facing ever-changing challenges, and current challenges will continue to evolve. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has had the most negative impact on the poorest, most vulnerable, and marginalized communities (Pearson & Reddy, 2021). Similarly, poverty, social pressures, disasters, wars, and the resulting migrations cause significant social problems for both migrants and people in the destination country. In the face of problems that inevitably arise, people need to be both sensitive and find solutions to the problem.

Gandolfi and Mills (2023) argue that young people must learn to become critical thinkers who can explore the dominant discourses that shape the world to uncover injustices embedded in their hypothetical logic. Through correct reasoning, critical and creative thinking, and effective decision-making strategies, individuals can identify new problems and generate effective solutions. Of course, even when individuals recognize inequalities related to social justice, they may choose not to confront these social inequalities. Recognizing social inequalities does not guarantee action, but knowledge about existing social inequalities is essential for social justice (Torres-Harding et al., 2014). In this context, social justice and critical thinking can relate. To the best of our knowledge, no studies in the literature examine the relationship between social justice attitudes and critical thinking. However, studies reveal that there is a relationship between critical thinking and democratic values (Uluçınar & Aypay, 2018), attitudes towards socioscientific issues (Yılmaz & Salman, 2022), diversity and openness to challenge (Álvarez-Huerta et al., 2022; Bowman, 2014). The fact that Adams' (2021) study on understanding diversity and social justice also increased prospective teachers' reflection and critical thinking levels, and Nganga (2019) found the 4Cs, which include critical thinking, to be effective in teaching fundamental knowledge and skills on global awareness and social justice issues, suggests that these two concepts can address together.

Individuals' success in solving their problems can make their lives more effective. Therefore, the education that individuals receive should support this. Students frequently experience inequalities, prejudices, and marginalization linked to race, language, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and SES, and schools often perpetuate inequality for many students rather than promoting social justice (Jacobs & Perez, 2023). By adopting a pedagogical approach, teachers can position themselves as agents of change within the classroom, the school, and society (Bourn, 2016). Policies across the globe are increasingly directing teachers to become 'change agents' about social justice (Pantić & Florian, 2015). The ability to recognize social injustice as one of the problems people see around them and find solutions to it can be achieved through critical thinking. However, it is necessary to recognize and produce solutions and take action on this issue. At this point, taking responsibility and fulfilling one's responsibilities constitute the action dimension in solving problems. Responsibility is to fulfill a job or task as best as possible (Lickona, 1991). In other words,

<sup>1</sup>Bursa Uludag University, gultekinfiliz@uludag.edu.tr, orcid.org/0000-0002-6281-3096

responsibility is an act, movement, and action. Therefore, the action dimension in solving problems is related to responsibility.

Considering this impact and obligation of teachers and schools, determining the variables related to social justice can help educators work towards social justice. The literature shows that social justice attitude CT disposition and SP responsibility variables are not discussed. This study will examine CT disposition and SP responsibility of students as predictors of social justice attitudes in prospective social studies teachers.

### **Social justice attitudes**

Social justice is the fair redistribution of resources and opportunities, the recognition of differences, the representation of interests in decision-making, and the development of abilities to live fulfilling lives (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). A well-developed understanding of social justice will contribute to the establishment of a sense of peace and justice in society and, thus, to the creation of healthy living environments (Demirkaya & Ünal, 2018).

All societal groups, regardless of their cultural, economic, and social power, aim to reach higher levels of education and skills to achieve a better life. Different educational opportunities also lead to inequalities in educational outcomes and labor market opportunities. This pattern usually reproduces, over generations, the privileges and persistent inequalities of certain groups in society (Pearson & Reddy, 2021). The social inequality in education systems suggests that teachers are crucial in promoting more equitable educational outcomes for marginalized students (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). Social justice education is a pedagogical practice that engages students in critically discussing, examining, and actively exploring the reasons behind social inequalities and how unjust practices perpetuate power and privilege that impact their lives (King & Kasun, 2013). Social justice education is a pedagogical practice that engages students in critically discussing, reviewing, and actively exploring the reasons behind social inequalities and how unjust practices affect their lives.

Increasing diversity in classrooms makes it necessary to prepare prospective teachers to meet the challenges this will bring. Teacher education for social justice remains an international concern (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). When teacher education programs fail to prepare teachers with the skills to create equitable learning environments for students of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and abilities, they inadvertently contribute to underachievement among at-risk groups (Sleeter, 2013).

At the heart of social justice in teacher education is how teachers understand who their students are and how teachers see and respond to them to promote learning and growth (Pugach et al., 2019). Instead of focusing on impersonal measures of student achievement such as attendance, test scores, and grades, a teacher's daily personal experience with their students and the knowledge gained from getting to know their students allows for pedagogy and curriculum that responds to local needs (Reyes et al., 2021).

Kaur (2012) defines a teacher for social justice and equity as a person who recognizes and challenges the inequalities and injustices that prevail in education and society, who understands and questions their positions, beliefs, attitudes, and their role in maintaining the status quo, and who works with and for diverse learners on an individual or collective level to advocate for a fairer and more equitable life chances for all learners, and who envisions and works for a more just society. From this perspective, social justice in education is crucial to social change. In this context, it would be functional to conduct studies to increase the social justice attitudes of teachers and prospective teachers and emphasize which knowledge and skills should be addressed in these studies.

### **Critical thinking disposition**

Critical thinking is a purposeful, self-regulated judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation inference, and an explanation of the ideas based on this judgment (Fonga et al., 2017). Critical thinking is defined to include both cognitive and dispositional dimensions. The cognitive dimension focuses on an individual's ability to understand a problem and produce reasonable solutions to the defined problem by emphasizing reasoning and logical thinking, which are closely related to intellectual ability (Sosu, 2013). CT disposition is the consistent internal motivation to use critical thinking skills to decide what to believe and do (Facione, 2000). The disposition dimension refers to the willingness to apply these skills when a problem is to be solved or a decision is to be made (Facione et al., 1995). CT disposition is vital for critical thinking because critical thinking is not possible without disposition (Chen et al., 2019). Critical openness, one of the dimensions of CT disposition, reflects the tendency to be open to new ideas, to review them critically, and to be ready to change one's views in the light of evidence. Reflective skepticism is the willingness to learn from past

experiences and question evidence (Sosu, 2013). Abrami et al. (2008) argue that the six skills (interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation), 16 sub-skills, and 19 dispositions (inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, understanding others, e.g.) that the Delphi Committee associated with critical thinking provides a complex normative structure for understanding and assessing the qualities of cognition.

Critical thinking, which has widely become one of the main goals of higher education, has been incorporated into discipline-specific learning and teaching experiences by academic faculty (Liyanage et al., 2011). For example, studies in fields such as medicine (Shakurnia et al., 2021; Pu et al., 2019), nursing (Chen et al., 2019), and business administration (Calma & Davies, 2021) have emphasized the value of critical thinking in these fields. Teacher education is also one of the prominent topics in this context. Studies conducted with pre-service teachers have shown that CT disposition is associated with higher-order thinking and reasoning (Çelik & Özdemir, 2020), problem-solving (Temel, 2014), creative self-concept and scientific creativity (Qiang et al., 2020), self-efficacy (Yüksel & Balcı, 2012), success-oriented motivation (Sevim & Oben-Şahin, 2021), learning styles (Yeler & Ocak, 2021), epistemological beliefs (Çarkıtı & Kurnaz, 2022), creative confidence belief (Álvarez-Huerta et al., 2022), emotional intelligence (Sk & Halder, 2020).

The development of social justice understanding moves individuals beyond conventional thinking. Thus, students are more likely to reject reactionary stances and to form positions supported by evidence and based on democratic, egalitarian principles (Misco & Shivele, 2016). In other words, social justice attitudes require more than ordinary thinking. Therefore, critical thinking may be a variable related to social justice attitudes.

### **Student Personal Responsibility**

Responsibility is the most important of the values necessary for success in academic and social life (Machant et al., 2019). It is a typical primary value among universal values (Kirschenbaum, 1995). It is also characterized as an emotion (Başaran, 2005). Responsibility is defined as 'fulfilling one's life duty' (Yavuzer, 1998); 'positive obligations' (Lickona, 1991); 'bearing the consequences of one's actions, assuming the consequences of one's behavior' (Bak, 2011; Başaran, 2005; Glover, 1970; Owens, 1983; Pehlivan, 2003; Unutkan, 2005); 'being reliable, being trustworthy' (Ay, 2003; Bak, 2011); a way of preventing adverse effects (Özen, 2009); 'having personal integrity, being the source of something and being connectable' (James, 1999). Differently, Altınköprü (1999) considers responsibility as a process that develops with observations from birth, in which the individual compromises himself/herself and shares himself/herself with others.

It is possible to divide responsibility into two categories: personal and social (Mowlin et al., 2011). In the literature, there are more studies on social responsibility rather than personal responsibility from entirely different fields (Bufford et al., 2004; Çubukçu & Gültekin, 2006; Ercan, 2009; Gündüz, 2014; Harris, 2004; Peterson & Hermans, 2004; Scales et al., 2000; Sezer & Çoban, 2016; Tam & Yeung, 1999; Tranier, 2005, g.). Personal responsibility is considered a skill (Canter, 2000; Chamberlin, 1994; Ellenburg, 2001) defined as controlling one's actions and thoughts (Kapıkıran, 2008) and engaging in behaviors that will improve the body and spirit (Özen, 2009).

Kaya and Doğan (2014) found that many higher education institutions have academic rules that students must follow. In this context, they expressed student responsibilities as taking the consequences of their choices, taking care of and directing their academic life, and establishing respectful communication with their teachers. At this point, the concept of academic or SP responsibility (Singg & Ader, 2001) emerges as one of the types of personal responsibility at the point of adopting the rules by students and fulfilling their responsibilities. In this sense, the tasks a student undertakes for his/her academic and social success at school and the state of fulfilling them can be defined as SP responsibility. SP responsibility exhibited at school, a social environment rather than an individual's responsibilities, such as self-care, has been prioritized regarding social problems. Social responsibility is related to the concept of social justice at this point. However, as one of the important social institutions, the question of whether the fulfillment of students' responsibilities at school is related to social justice has been the point that has attracted our attention.

### **The present study**

Effective teaching requires more than practical teaching skills. Focusing on teaching, efficiency, outcomes, and skills makes defining what counts as responsive and effective teaching challenging and undermines issues of justice and equity (Kaur, 2012). Teacher education programs need to prepare teacher candidates to work with diverse populations of children (Lin & Lucey, 2010). In order to create a fair educational environment and to raise individuals who embrace social justice, it is necessary to focus on

teachers' perceptions of social justice. Social justice education is essential in presenting future generations with individuals aware of respect for differences, justice, living in society, and democratic life (Demirkaya & Ünal, 2018). In this context, social studies courses and social studies teachers can be considered to have an important role.

The social studies course is one of the introductory courses taught in grades 5, 6, and 7 and is the most appropriate course for social justice education given its content (Demirkaya & Ünal, 2018). One of the aims of this course is to raise individuals with social justice beliefs (McGee & Hostetler, 2014). Social studies teacher education also focuses heavily on social justice (Misco & Shievel, 2016). Social studies teachers can convey the necessity of social justice efforts to their students in ways that promote agency as individuals capable of changing the world in which they live (King & Kasun, 2013).

Social studies student teachers consider the acquisition of the value of sensitivity to new generations to be significant in ensuring social harmony and unity and solving local and global problems (Yılar et al., 2022). Similarly, prospective teachers think that emphasizing the phenomenon of democracy gives students the value of social justice (Yılmaz & Akgün, 2019). Social studies student teachers also expect undergraduate education programs to provide them with moral and value equipment that will add many values and character maturity (Ersoy & Yağcıoğlu, 2019). The results of these studies can be interpreted that these students are aware of the importance of social justice and want to develop in terms of values. Awareness of social injustices is critical. Özden and Karadağ (2021) found that pre-service social studies teacher who were more interested in global problems and events followed them and were more knowledgeable about them had higher levels of global citizenship.

At the international level, many studies published in teacher education and social justice mainly offer reflections or recommendations on practice (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). In the literature, how studies on social justice should be (Hubbard & Swain, 2017), its relationship with the perception of identity strength in participating in actions that impose legal responsibility on the personal (Kaya & Mamatoğlu, 2019), and its effect on attitudes towards refugees (Güler et al., 2021) are emphasized. There are not many relational studies on which characteristics of individuals should be strengthened and which characteristics should be gained to individuals in gaining social justice attitudes. Similarly, a systematic review of the studies on critical thinking skills and CT disposition with pre-service teachers in Turkey revealed that the subject was mainly handled from a traditional perspective and that the studies addressing the subject from a critical perspective (e.g., critical thinking as part of democratic citizenship and socially constructed skill) were limited (Yıldırım-Taştı & Yıldırım, 2022). As a result, when considered in terms of the literature and the characteristics of the concepts, it is thought that CT disposition and SP responsibility level will contribute to the answer to the question of "which individual characteristics or variables should be emphasized in studies on the development of social justice attitude" and the applications related to the subject. For this reason, whether CT disposition and SP responsibility predict social justice attitudes in prospective social studies teacher will be examined.

## **METHOD**

In this study, a correlational model was used to examine the relationship between CT disposition, SP responsibility, and social justice attitude of prospective social studies teacher.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were 341 students from universities from different cities in Türkiye (Adana, Antalya, Aksaray, Bursa, Bolu, Denizli, İzmir, Kahramanmaraş, Kayseri, Tokat) ranging in age from 18 to 30+ years (18-21 age=54.8%, 22-25=40.2%, 26-30=1.2%, 30+=3.8%; 73.3% female). They were in the undergraduate program in social studies education (1st year=21.7%, 2nd year=25.2%, 3rd year=22.6%, 4th year=29.0%, 5th year=1.5%).

### **Procedure**

The convenience sample method was used in the study. The data were collected online from students in the social studies education departments of universities in the cities mentioned above. Potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how to access the data collection tools. The students who agreed to participate were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could leave the study at any time, that no personal information was requested, and that the information collected would only be used anonymously for the scientific study. All students who agreed to participate in the study signed informed

consent before data collection. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Bursa Uludağ University (27.01.2021-22) that the study was ethically appropriate.

### Limitation

This study is limited to students from the social studies education majors. Only this criterion was used in the sample selection, and the participants' religious, ethnic, racial, e.g., identities were not considered. The study was conducted with emerging adults. These individuals most likely have different roles and responsibilities, but in this study, personal responsibilities were addressed only in terms of student responsibilities.

### Instruments

*Social justice attitude.* Social justice attitude was assessed using the Social Justice Scale (Turkish form by Cırık, 2015; original form by Torres-Harding et al., 2012). The Social Justice Scale comprises 24 items that measure social justice attitudes, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, and behavioral intentions. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=Totally disagree; 7=Totally agree). Internal consistency of scale scores (Cronbach's alpha) in the present sample was 0.92, 0.88, 0.85, 0.90, and 0.93 for the dimensions of social justice attitudes, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms and behavioral intentions, and overall scale, respectively.

*Critical thinking disposition.* CT disposition was evaluated using the Critical Thinking Disposition Scale (CTDS; Turkish adaptation by Akin et al., 2015; original instrument by Sosu, 2013). The CTDS comprises 11 items that measure critical openness and reflective skepticism, two components of the disposition towards critical thinking. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = Totally disagree; 5 = Totally agree). Internal consistency of scale scores (Cronbach's alpha) in the present sample was 0.76, 0.77, and 0.85 for the dimensions of critical openness, reflective skepticism, and overall scale, respectively.

*Student personal responsibility.* ST responsibility was measured using the Student Personal Responsibility Scale-10 (Turkish form by Doğan, 2015; original form by Singg & Ader, 2001), comprising 10 items. Each item is rated 1 (most like me), 2 (somewhat like me), 3 (very little like me), or 4 (mostly unlike me). The internal consistency of scale scores in the present sample was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ).

### Data analysis

First of all, the data were examined, and 5 cases were excluded from the analysis due to biased/incorrect answers (all or almost all of one or two scales were marked as "completely agree" or "completely disagree"). And then, the data were examined for outlier, normality, and multicollinearity. Mahalanobis distance value was checked in an outlier analysis, and 11 cases were removed from the dataset. In the data analysis, skewness and kurtosis values were used to examine normal distribution. In addition, VIF and tolerance values for multicollinearity were also examined, and no multicollinearity was found. As a result of the examinations, 341 participants who met the assumptions required for analysis were analyzed. Pearson correlation was used to calculate the correlations between social justice, CT disposition, and SP responsibility. The predictive power of CP disposition and SP responsibility was analyzed by multiple linear regression analysis.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the variables of the study are presented in Table 1. As seen in Table 1, skewness and kurtosis values are within the acceptable limits of normality. When the mean scores of the participants are examined, it is seen that they define themselves as having a high level of CT disposition, SP responsibility, and social justice.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for CT disposition, SP responsibility, and social justice**

	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE
CT disposition	26	55	45.09	5.58	-0.33	0.13	-0.16	0.26
SP responsibility	19	40	33.24	3.98	-0.78	0.13	0.64	0.26
Social justice	87	168	139.91	16.43	-0.65	0.13	0.21	0.26

The correlation analysis of the study variables is reported in Table 2. As seen in Table 2, a significant positive correlation was found between social justice and CT disposition ( $r=0.58$ ) and SP responsibility ( $r=0.26$ ). A significant positive correlation was found between CT disposition and SP responsibility ( $r=0.31$ ) ( $p<0.01$ ).

**Table 2. Correlation for CT disposition, SP responsibility, and social justice**

	CT disposition	SP responsibility	Social justice
CT disposition	-		
SP responsibility	0.31**	-	
Social justice	0.58**	0.26**	-

\*\*p<0.01

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of CT disposition and SP responsibility on social justice. The results are reported in Table 4. CT disposition and SP responsibility explain 34% of the total variance related to social justice ( $R=0.58$ ,  $R^2=0.34$ ,  $F=88.29$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Among the predictor variables, only CT disposition ( $\beta=0.55$ ) is a significant predictor of social justice ( $p<0.01$ ). The effect of SP responsibility ( $\beta=0.08$ ) is not significant ( $p>0.01$ ). These findings show that CT disposition is the crucial variable for social justice attitudes of prospective social studies teachers.

**Table 3. Multiple regression analysis of predictors of social justice**

	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p	Tolerance	VIF
CT disposition	1.62	0.13	0.55	11.89	0.00**	0.90	1.10
SP responsibility	0.36	0.18	0.08	1.91	0.05	0.90	1.10

Dependent variable CT disposition,  $R=0.58$ ,  $R^2=0.34$ , Adjusted  $R^2=0.33$ ,  $F=88.29$

\*\*p<0.01

## DISCUSSION and SUGGESTIONS

This study aims to examine the predictive effect of CP disposition and SP responsibilities on social justice. There is a positive relationship between CT disposition and CT disposition of prospective social studies teacher. Students with higher CT dispositions have higher social justice attitudes and a tendency to exhibit more behaviors related to social justice. Although this result is not directly related to social justice, it is consistent with the results revealing the relationship between CT disposition and democratic values (Uluçınar & Aypay, 2018), attitudes towards socioscientific issues (Yılmaz & Salman, 2022), diversity and openness to challenge (Álvarez-Huerta et al., 2022; Bowman, 2014). Given that social justice education is a pedagogical practice (King & Kasun, 2013) that encourages students to engage with unjust practices critically, the causes of social inequalities, and how they perpetuate the power and privilege that cause injustice, the result of the study is consistent with the structure of the concept. Pu et al. (2019) argue that critical thinking is an emancipatory force in education, and there is a consensus that it is a powerful resource for one's personal and social life. In this context, the result of the study also emphasizes the importance of critical thinking for a fair and egalitarian understanding of education.

Critical thinking considered a fundamental skill for the information age, involves not only thinking about significant problems in fields of science, mathematics, and history but also thinking about the social, political, and ethical challenges of everyday life in an increasingly complex and multifaceted world (Abrami et al., 2008). Individuals who are open to new ideas and critically evaluate these ideas are also more willing to challenge their own beliefs and values and learn from diversity. Therefore, educational institutions need to create opportunities for students to encounter different perspectives on life (Álvarez-Huerta et al., 2022). Therefore, this finding of the study underlines that the development of CT disposition should be emphasized and included in implementation studies related to social justice.

The effect of SP responsibility, another variable whose predictive effect was investigated in the study, on social justice attitudes was not significant. The lack of research in the context of SP responsibility does not allow for comparison with the literature. It was expected that students' fulfillment of responsibilities by adopting rules (Singg & Ader, 2001) would be a variable explaining social justice attitude. University students have many responsibilities besides being students due to being separated from their families due to their developmental periods and university education. The result may be because these responsibilities are handled only in terms of the studentship role, and the responsibilities related to the studentship may have remained in the background for social studies education students. In this context, in future studies, more comprehensive examinations on how students define responsibilities within the scope of their student role, how much they

care about them, how they evaluate them within the scope of their individual and social responsibilities, and how they associate them with social justice are recommended.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that students who are more inclined to think critically have higher social justice attitudes. This finding highlights the importance of CT dispositions, especially in studies on improving social justice attitudes. It also emphasizes the importance of developing CT dispositions in the education of social studies teachers as individuals who will convey the importance of social justice efforts to their students and encourage them to take action to change the world. In this study, responsibility was studied through the student roles of participants. In future studies, responsibility (personal and social) can be addressed more comprehensively.

### Declarations

### Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author(s) with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

### Ethics Approval

The formal ethics approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Bursa Uludag University (Approval Number/ID: 27.01.2021-22). We conducted the study in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration in 1975.

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### Research and Publication Ethics Statement

Hereby, we as the authors consciously assure that for the manuscript "Predictors of Social Justice: Critical Thinking Disposition and Student Personal Responsibility" the following is fulfilled:

- This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- The paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

### Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

The authors provide equal contributions to this work.

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