TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: AN ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM SOCIAL JUSTICE APPROACH

by

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ABSTRACT

ASHLEY WILSON. Teaching Social Justice in Christian Education: An English Language Arts Classroom Social Justice Approach. (Under the direction of DR. MEGHAN BARNES).

Advocating for social justice within Christian Education proves to be an underrepresented area of research in the field of education. As an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher working in a private Christian school, I am particularly interested in the challenges ELA teachers working in private Christian schools may encounter when they try to incorporate social justice pedagogy into their teaching, as well as potential strategies to mitigate those challenges. My research explored the challenges of teaching social justice within the realm of Christian education, specifically in ELA. I began by conducting a literature review of peer-reviewed empirical research aimed at (1) learning more about current research in the field of social justice and Christian education and (2) identifying pedagogical strategies that have been used to integrate social justice pedagogy in English curricula across public, private, and charter schools. I incorporated the strategies I learn about through my academic research into lesson plans that I taught in the Spring of 2022.

My research is informed by Miller et al. (2011), NCTE position statements (*National Council,* 2010), Boyd and Coffey (2021), *Teaching for Social Justice and the Common Core: Justice-Oriented Curriculum for Language and Literacy* (Dover, 2016), and "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Methodology, Terminology, and Practice" (Paris, 2013). My research is guided by two research questions:

1. What are the challenges and limitations for educators teaching literature from a social justice lens specifically within a private Christian school?

2. How do students respond to an intentional social justice approach to literature in a private (Christian) English I classroom?

Deeper still, my research questions will challenge my own teaching strategies and the religious and cultural implications of teaching in a private Christian school with limited cultural diversity. Through my research questions, I hope to use my position as a ninth-grade English teacher to incorporate social justice within my curriculum and foster an inclusive learning environment that will serve as an example for school-wide change.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my students and fellow teachers, in the private or public sector, who

are dedicated to advocating for social justice.

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your willingness to participate in this study and your dedication to this work. You are a reminder

of why I chose to be a teacher.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACSI   Association of Christian Schools International

AE   Advanced Exposure to Private Christian School

ELA   English Language Arts

CEE   Conference on English Education

CCSS   Common Core State Standards

IBL   Inquiry Based Learning

NCTE   National Council of Teachers of English

PBL   Project Based Learning

SEL   Social Emotional Learning

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My background is in both public and private school. I am currently in my fourth year of teaching. Immediately after starting my first year in a public school, I realized that ELA classrooms have the unique potential to use anchor texts as a mode of teaching social justice and advocating for change, as Ashley Boyd argues in *Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom* (2014). I have witnessed many teachers struggling to balance standardized instruction while taking the time and risk to open their classrooms as spaces that advocate for social justice. When I became a private Christian school teacher, I realized that teaching social justice in a ninth-grade classroom creates even more challenges due to parental involvement, religious affiliation, education tied to monetary status, ease of access to education and technology, and a lack of racial, religious, and cultural diversity. Even so, it is critical for me to use my position and knowledge to teach students how to be aware of injustices in their communities and advocate for others.

I uphold a personal belief in accordance with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that "literacy education can be used to disrupt such inequitable hierarchies of power and privilege by adopting a stance on social justice and priming it for policy" (NCTE, 2010). It's my responsibility as an educator to guide students on how to be caretakers of and contributors to the world around them. Additionally, unlike the public schools in our district, there is no clear mission statement in our school's bylaws about advocacy for community or social justice beyond what we call "mission work." Despite these challenges, I have dedicated my thesis, research, and pedagogy to teaching my English students why and how we should advocate for social justice.

Earlier in my teaching career, I believed that I was successfully incorporating social justice into my English curriculum. When I started attending graduate school in the fall of 2020, I realized that I hadn't understood the pedagogy behind my methods. I also recognized that I have been placed in a unique position: a private Christian environment that typically avoids topics such as race, gender, and religious diversity in our curriculum, casual conversations, and pedagogy. In response, I began to revise my English lesson plans and dedicate more of my class time to a careful social justice approach with the wisdom and knowledge that I have acquired in my graduate studies.

This thesis is based on my teaching of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. I began my work by using data-driven research to guide my pedagogical approaches to teaching the novel. I revised my lesson plans to include connections to modern societal issues based on students' analysis of societal issues in *Things Fall Apart*. Students had the opportunity to select their own societal issue and apply it to the text in diverse ways. I relied upon student choice to enhance engagement and my own careful direct instruction to create rigorous and relevant lessons based upon social justice issues. Furthermore, I modeled advocacy for my students through mini-lessons, examples from classic literature, and personal experiences for each unit. Thus, students analyzed Achebe's text through the lens of social justice. Specifically, students explored issues such as homelessness, religious persecution, poverty, gender inequality, racism, bias, and corruption of power through rigorous, multimodal assignments.

Throughout this unit, I collected data to address my research questions. My first research question inquiries into the challenges and limitations for educators teaching literature from a social justice lens specifically within a private Christian school. For this

first question, I conducted an extensive literature review and maintained personal

reflection journals throughout my planning and instruction of *Things Fall Apart*.

In my second research question, I ask: How do students respond to an intentional

social justice approach to literature in a private (Christian) English I classroom? To

address this research question, I conducted two student surveys and conducted interviews

with students following their participation in the social justice-focused *Things Fall Apart*

unit.

I begin this thesis with a review of relevant literature, addressing the following:

- *What is social justice pedagogy? What does it include?*

- *Why is social justice pedagogy significant in the English Language Arts classroom, in particular?*

- *What does research tell us about the challenges/limitations that Christian school ELA teachers have experienced when trying to teach for social justice?*

I then introduce my methods for teaching and collecting data on this research project,

before reviewing my Findings. Finally, I draw on my Findings to offer implications and

conclusions.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The research and data collected in this study builds upon a large body of research regarding the language of social justice in education, teaching for social justice, strategies for advocating for social justice in English Language Arts classrooms, and pedagogy surrounding social justice approaches in schools. I begin by defining terms such as social justice, oppression, religious persecution, empathy, racism, and gender roles to clarify how I will be using the terms in this study and within my classroom. The foundational information regarding social justice vocabulary comes from researchers such as Buettner-Schmidt (2012), Grant (2016), Hytten (2011), Kraynak (2018), Rosa (2021), Miller et al. (2011), NCTE position statements (2010), Shyman (2015), and Valadez and Mirchi (2015). The purpose of defining these terms is to understand the importance of using a social justice approach to promote student advocacy in their schools and communities.

After defining these terms, I investigate the relationship between the language of social justice and how it is implemented in pedagogy and practice. I closely examine the relevant studies for common pedagogical strategies social justice educators implement in their English Language Arts classrooms. Specifically, I focus on societal issues such as racism, religious persecution, and gender roles. By focusing on these four components, I contextualize my research questions with the relevant literature.

The next section of the review is dedicated to student experiences regarding social justice approaches. The bulk of my research surrounding student experiences with social justice approaches is from 2010-2021. As the literature suggests, there is not one clear-cut way to teach social justice in English Classrooms. However, there is a great body of research of teachers focusing on themes such as racism, religious persecution, and gender

roles in public schools. Since there is minimal research on social justice educational approaches in private schools, I will discuss in the final section of the literature review current trends and research regarding effective social justice approaches in the private school sector. In this section, emphasis will be placed on more recent research, as the term "social justice education" is constantly evolving in academia and classroom implementation.

Defining Social Justice

"Language can serve as a key lens through which to track how various structures of power come to be understood and contested, as well as their deceptive reconstitution and reproduction under the auspices of progress" (Rosa, 2021, p. 1165).

For this study, it is vital to understand how the term "social justice" has been used in the past to determine how it should be used in the present to create an equitable future. My rationale for discussing the language of social justice is twofold: 1) To suggest that language has meaning and therefore language use becomes a powerful classroom tool and 2) To demonstrate careful analysis and implementation of the language surrounding social justice. Social justice appears to be an abstract, illusive, or blanket term that can cause confusion for teachers seeking to implement social justice pedagogy within their classrooms. Sleeter (2015) recognizes that the term,

> "Social justice" is so widely used that [she has] become concerned it may lose its meaning. Regardless, she argues that most people agree on its broad principles, such as these: 1) Equity, the principle of fairness. . . 2) Activism, the principle of agency. . . [and] 3) Social literacy, the principle of relevance. (Sleeter, 2015, p. xiv)

I will focus on themes such as racism, religious persecution, and gender roles in the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Defining racism, religious persecution, and gender roles prior to introducing the novel is essential to my pedagogy and framework for this study.

Racism, Religious Persecution, and Gender Discrimination

Common themes for social justice educators as indicated by Dover (2013), Boyd and Coffey (2021), and Carlisle et al. (2006), are racism, oppression, religious persecution, and gender discrimination. In this study, I focus on discrimination through racism, religious persecution, and enforced gender roles within the context of *Things Fall Apart*. My students will be prompted to connect these themes of (in)justice to the world, the United States, and their personal experiences.

Racism

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 1963).

Baynum (2021) contextualizes racism, privilege, and oppression through the work of Toni Morrison, Martin Luther King Jr., and James Baldwin. Baynum states that "while racism is no fiction, race is a fiction" (p. 241), arguing that race is a construct, but racism is a current and pressing issue in our society. This means that educators of social justice must inform students about racism in all its forms. Baynum warns educators of the pitfalls of studying racism without addressing the cultural and historical context and applying it appropriately to the world around them. On racism, Baynum (2021) further argues that,

In a less racist society, traditionally racially privileged people would increasingly

become accustomed to living with, communicating with, and working with

racially under-privileged people who are their supervisors, colleagues, neighbors,

classmates, and trusted professional contacts, among other roles. This is what a

commitment to social justice requires, for many. (Baynum, 2021, p. 236)

In a predominately White and economically privileged school, most participants in this

study are not familiar with classrooms that reflect racial diversity. Without the exposure

to other cultures and experiences, students will not be as accustomed to various forms of

diversity until they enter college. Students in this study are familiar with the concepts of

'whiteness' and 'White privilege,' but they struggle to grasp what racism looks like in

modern times and in their communities. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. states, any type of

injustice, especially racial injustice, threatens all of society. He persists that injustice

done to a group of people will negatively impact other groups of people. Therefore,

focusing on one type of injustice and ignoring the rest will lead to little societal change.

Another researcher, Gair (2017), tackles issues such as racism within schools

through an empathy and identity mindset. Gair mentions the dangers of passive empathy,

stating: "Some authors speculate that cultivating empathy can reduce students' prejudice

and racism. [Of interest,] Boler (1999) differentiated between passive and active

empathy, identifying that passive empathy may not lead to upholding an obligation to

confront racism" (p. 167). While Baynum (2021) addresses the pitfalls of focusing on

race, Gair compares whiteness to passive empathy (empathy without action or change). In

his study findings, Gair mentions "some students might inaccurately perceive their own

levels of racism, and they may remain hostage to the subtleties of whiteness ideology and

passive empathy, this again inhibiting their actions for social justice" (p. 176). Racism can be a difficult subject for educators to approach in the classroom, especially when students are unaware of racial biases or have a limited exposure to critically thinking about racial constructs. Gair (2017) and Baynum (2021) both address the need for introducing and exposing racism, but they take different approaches. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) argues that racism is a form of injustice that needs to be addresses, as all injustices do, as an issue of the heart that harms all of society.

Religious Persecution

"Freedom is holistic and does not just exist in an individual's mind. It is much more than a product of an individual's will; it is lived" (Tanchuck, 2021).

Another commonly discussed theme in social justice education is religious persecution. Hodge (2017) draws on the work of French (2002) to state that, "characteristics such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status can aggravate or alleviate [oppression.] Although systematic religious persecution may not be a problem in the United States, lesser forms of discrimination occur with some degree of frequency" (p. 145). Hodge argues that social justice advocacy should be primarily focused on the oppression of religion because religious freedom is at the core of all other freedoms. Hodge bases this foundational principle on Article 18 of the United Nations (1948):

> Everyone has the right to freedom [of] religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

In his article, Hodge maintains that the injustice of religious persecution is often overlooked in foreign policy, especially in countries where Christians are heavily persecuted, such as Sudan and China. In Sudan and China, Christians suffer physical harm for gathering to worship their religion. Hodge calls out the United States for speaking out against software piracy laws, but not about those who are suffering religious oppression. Hodge's arguments support the notion that human rights are inherent to religious morals and values. Therefore, religious freedom is important to uphold to model a just society. The students who are participants in this study are not expected to be Christians in order to attend our school. However, most of our students are vocal about being Christians. With one dominant religion at our school, other students may suffer religious persecution within our walls, without a voice and tools to advocate for themselves.

In a drastically different approach, Hollenbach (2020) argues that the legal protection of religious freedom for Christians has become problematic in women's rights (i.e. contraceptives) and same-sex marriages (i.e. challenging traditional gender roles.) Instead, Hollenbach (2020) argues that,

> The use of state power to enforce a single system of values will lead to conflict between church and state because of the Christian conviction that the deepest values transcend the state. When it is true to itself, therefore, Christianity will stand opposed to [these] regimes… it is no accident that the political persecution of Christians is widespread. (Hollencback, 2020, p. 551)

In this statement, Hollenbach compares Christian values to traditional ones that perpetuate traditional gender roles that may spur many injustices to vulnerable groups.

Hodge (2017) mentioned that there is little evidence of systemic religious persecution in the United States for Christians, but the conflict between church and state would most likely be deemed evidence enough for Hollenbach. Hollenbach (2020) strategically argues that legal cases that claim religious persecution are often misinterpreted as injustice, but he does concede that some perpetuation of traditional values by Christians are valid. He states: "Respect for freedom implies that the conscientious convictions of those who oppose such changes should be protected so long as this can be done without imposing injustice on others" (p. 558). Hollenbach's sense of social justice regarding religious persecution calls for legal protection against imposing one's religion on others which would be to the detriment of society as a whole.

Gender Discrimination

"NCTE posits that social justice is not a neutral term and may vary somewhat by person, culture, social class, gender, context, space, and time" (Grant, 2016).

Lastly, discussing injustices such as gender discrimination is a complicated topic in both religion and politics as well as in high school classrooms. Ellison et al. (2019) draws from multiple identity theory (i.e., the concept that there are multiple dimensions of identity) as proposed by Abes et al. (2007). In this study, Ellison et al. use gender discrimination to moderate discussions amongst White populations so they can reach an understanding of diversity, injustices, and other forms of oppression. While the researchers' arguments center around White privilege awareness and creating an open dialogue around diversity, their points about gender apply directly to this study. In this context, Ellison et al. (2019) argues that "gender matters [because] factors such as masculinity, a sense of independence, and economic pressures may be barriers for men to

acknowledging systems of racial privilege" (p. 551). In my study, I compare the responses of male and female students to document their level of awareness of social justice issues such as gender inequalities or discrimination. I then analyze my students' level of desire to advocate for these types of inequalities in their communities. Since this was the first time many of my students heard the term "social justice," I dedicate some time to explaining the origin of the term. In the next section, I delve into the origin of social justice, what scholars understand the term to mean, and how I am using it as an educator within my context.

Social Justice Origins

The origin of the term "social justice" emerged from two Catholic priests, Antonio Rosmini and Luigi Taparelli, in the 1840s (Kraynak, 2018). Neither priest received much attention for the phrase "*la giustizia sociale*" as it was understood to be a theoretical approach or biblical interpretation of enacting good deeds for the poor and needy. In Taparelli's *Theoretical Essay on Natural Right* (1840), he focused on the nature of man to be social in volunteer work that "flourished in decentralized structures of power" (p. 4). Taparelli defined social justice as the natural desire for man to be "social" by advocating for equality between social hierarchies. Rosmini's book, *The Constitution Under Social Justice* (1848), combines the social nature of man with the Thomistic approach that man is rational and enacts social change. Rosmini, who is more widely recognized for coining the term "social justice," argued that man advocates for "modern liberal principles of natural rights and individual human dignity" (p. 5). This is slightly different from Taparelli's definition because Rosmini believes that governmental bodies

of power fail to protect human rights and tend to lose sight of the society in which it is meant to govern.

Therefore, Kraynak focuses on Rosmini's definition of social justice more than Taparelli's approach because Rosmini's theory combines ancient philosophy and biblical theology with modern societal implications. According to Kraynak, the origin of social justice is based on a combination of Catholic humanitarian efforts, Aristotle's concept of "eudaimonological good," Thomistic metaphysics, and Christian virtues of divine providence. Aristotle's study is foundational to Rosmini's concept of social justice because Aristotle defines the "eudaimonological good" as "the highest ethical goal [for a person] is happiness and personal well-being" (Merriam-Webster). This means that one can obtain a "good soul" through seeking morality, meaning, and happiness. Aristotle argues eudaimonological good must involve the idea of "[general justice] where civil law is understood to shape citizens for the happiness of the political community" (Kraynak, pp. 7-8). Kraynak elaborates on this point, defending Aristotle's view that striving for general justice must be enacted through civil law. Additionally, St. Thomas Aquinas' metaphysical theory of "natural law," where all people possess intrinsic rights and morality, provides a supporting argument for Aristotle's' civil law (p. 18). According to Rosmini, civil law and natural law coincide by the logic that if humans are born with a desire for morality, then they should naturally seek social peace. Kraynak argues that Rosmini perpetuated a Christian view that the pursuit of social justice means justice through civil (justice for the community), natural (justice intrinsic to humanity,) and divine law (God's justice):

[Social justice is] a cause of peace and harmony—" unity in peace," as Thomas calls it—which is more than simply treating people fairly; it means overcoming hatred and class warfare. Social justice promotes the Christian virtue of social peace by giving just deserts to all classes of society, to the rich as well as to the poor and disenfranchised[...] social peace requires the state to give due recognition to everyone in their different social roles as well as in their essential humanity, and this formula makes up the complete common good[…] Rosmini is making the simple point that Christian charity does not require democracy in the political sphere or socialism in the economic sphere because God's realm and Caesar's realm are distinct (Kraynak, 2018, pp. 17-18).

Kraynak's (2018) argument above demonstrates that striving for social justice does not require Christians to get involved in politics, but to advocate for their fellow man in their communities from a moral standpoint. His idea encourages less involvement in systemic governmental changes and more advocacy in local community affairs.

Kraynak argues that this concept of social justice had little controversy at its genesis, but it has become a controversial term in modern day. He states, "most people associate [social justice] with progressive politics and assume that it means economic and social equality or something akin to socialism" (p. 3). Kraynak's (2018) paper *The Origins of "Social Justice" in the Natural Law Philosophy of Antonio Rosmini* focuses on Rosimin's approach to social justice as a more robust, accurate, and non-controversial portrayal of John Rawls' Catholic social teaching. Rawls' Catholic social teaching differs slightly from Rosmini's by "[taking] 'justice as fairness' to mean the essential equality of persons in a hypothetical 'original position' [as arbitrary] in choosing the rules of a just

society" (p. 28). Kraynak's more concrete definition of social justice relies on a combination of Rosmini's emphasis on the social nature of man and Rawls' more realistic approach that addresses the challenge of balancing equality with unjust reward. This "new ideal of social justice, understood as the complete common good that aims at social harmony by balancing the equal rights and dignity of the human person with the inequalities inherent in the social nature of man" therefore accurately depicts the origin and purpose of social justice (Kraynak, 2018, p. 6). Although the term "social justice" breeds confusion and political implications in modern day, Kraynak maintains that it is, at its core, representative of a Catholic desire to advocate for equality and bring dignity to those who suffer. Kraynak infers that social injustice evolves and can take on modern nuances, but they are rooted in a natural desire to strive for social balance.

As illustrated above, there is controversy between researchers of social justice and their interpretations of its political, or non-political, nature. Kraynak's definition of social justice is in opposition to Grant's stance in his article *Depoliticization of the language of social justice, multiculturalism, and multicultural education* (2016). Grant argues that the depoliticization of terms such as social justice absurdly ignores the nature of justice as a call to action. Grant clearly expresses the need for social action to bring about social change. To achieve this end, he argues that social justice is a larger issue that must be addressed in political spaces. By commenting on the language use of social justice around the world, Grant encourages a critical lens on the interpretation of the terms, or replacement terms, for social justice. He argues, "phrases such as 'more with less', 'social safety nets,' and 'corporate governance' [have] been constructed to imply care or 'justice' for the least among us are misleading" (p. 11). Grant argues that replacement

phrases aimed at neutrality, like those listed above, can silence or mute advocates in political spaces. Instead, Grant argues for using the term "social justice" so that those in power cannot distance themselves from taking responsibility for a societal issue.

Social Justice and Education

Grant agrees with National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) stance on incorporating social justice in English classrooms. He summarizes the NCTE statement (2010), specifying that,

> Social justice presupposes that all people are 'worthy of human dignity, that all are worthy of the same opportunities in life, that the contract they enter into within society's institutions (e.g., schools) must honor their personhood, sociocultural advantages, and disadvantages. (Grant, 2016, p. 4)

Essentially, Grant argues against a neutral stance on social justice issues in schools and advocates for systemic change that combats sociocultural and identity inequities in schools. Grant's conception of social justice differs from Kraynak who maintains that social justice is not necessarily meant to be a systemic, politically charged approach. Rather, Kraynak argues that social justice encourages morality in modern societal issues in civil law to influence social change. Both researchers argue the need for social justice and use action-affirmative language, but they disagree on the political nature of the term.

In the context of this study, I draw on the researchers and philosophers presented above to define social justice as meaning that everyone deserves equal opportunity, participation, rights, and representation (Sleeter, 2015). As educators, then, it is our personal responsibility to recognize that there are injustices within our communities, and largely, our world (CEE, 2009). Furthermore, I draw upon Kraynak's support of

Rosimin's argument (2018) that it is our moral, civic, and social obligation to combat injustices of any kind by advocating for the oppressed according to our abilities and gifts. Regardless of their background, everyone is responsible for combating injustice in their communities to enact larger social change (Grant, 2016). specific

Regarding recent interpretation of the term and how it has been taken up in educational spaces, NCTE (2010) states that they support teachers who "teach about social injustice and discrimination in all its forms with regard to differences in race, ethnicity, culture, gender, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, national origin, language, spiritual belief, sexual orientation, socioeconomic circumstance, and environment" (p. 2). This statement expresses NCTE's desire for teachers to incorporate societal issues within ELA classrooms. Additionally, their language encourages an inclusive learning and teaching environment for all students. However, NCTE does not explicitly state how teachers should approach these topics or present a shared language to use when introducing social justice approaches. NCTE's general position statement on social justice education reads as follows:

> We commit to interrupting current practices that reproduce social,
> cultural, moral, economic, gendered, intellectual, and physical
> injustices. To prime social justice for policy in schools, it must be
> understood that it evades easy definition and is a grounded theory, a
> stance/position, a pedagogy, a process, a framework for research,
> and a promise. (CEE Position Statement, 2009)

While the Conference on English Education (CEE) Position Statement appears to be a simplistic framework, teachers can build upon it when taking a social justice approach in

ELA classrooms. CEE expresses the need to reevaluate current teaching practices which is the first step in creating an equitable school system for students. Grant (2016) adds his interpretation of the statement above: "A descriptive and fluid definition of social justice, can become an embodied identity (through coursework), has efficacy in multiple contexts, and recognizes that students bring inequitable histories" (p. 3). Grant's focus on inequitable histories provides a modern and applicable lens to view social justice as an active pursuit to combat injustice through the introduction of inclusive narratives and social policies.

Kraynak (2018) also recognizes the tendency to view social justice as an abstract concept. He praises John Rawls' Catholic social teaching approach for its recognition of the need to condemn unjust social rewards (i.e., more legislative power to property owners) to enact equity for all. According to Kraynak, social justice advocacy is a moral obligation to combat injustice from a communal and humanitarian standpoint. Grant clearly argues that fighting systemic injustices means one cannot take a neutral political stance on these issues. The NCTE (2009) statement voices the organization's commitment to supporting teachers dedicated to incorporating social justice, which is defined as a "promise," a "framework," a "pedagogy," and a "stance" within the classroom. These definitions of social justice provide context for the evolution of the term "social justice."

Teaching for Social Justice

The phrase "teaching for social justice" is commonly used in the field of education. Cochran-Smith et al. (2004) define teaching for social justice "as the attempt to use one's position in the classroom to promote social and educational reform within

and despite repressive educational conditions and mandates" (p. 518). Sleeter (2015) also adopts this definition of teaching for social justice and draws on teacher case studies to suggest that social justice is something for teachers to first model to students. To demonstrate "democratic activism: preparing young people to analyze and challenge forms of discrimination that they, their families, and others face, on behalf of equity for everyone," Sleeter (p. 61) suggests diving into unjust school policies with students. By focusing on oppression in literature, history, and political science, Sleeter and other researchers analyze effective strategies for guiding student understanding of oppression and how to combat oppressive policies. "Teaching for social justice," according to Sleeter and Cochran-Smith et al., is an action-affirmative calling specifically involving teachers and students alike. Sleeter emphasizes that teaching for social justice means the teacher must "[seek] to facilitate a living and learning environment for the development of liberatory thinking and action" (p. 61). Sleeter's words suggest that teachers must actively foster a classroom environment that models social justice through providing equal opportunities for students to represent diverse worldviews surrounding power and policies.

Furthermore, Dover et al. (2016) specifically define teaching for social justice as "developing democratic activism: an emphasis on equity of participation, representation, engagement, and outcome among diverse learners" (p. 518). For Dover et al., social justice in education tackles systemic issues within minority communities. Additionally, in their 2016 study, a "black teacher in an urban community of color in the Northeast, described teaching for social justice as 'an inquiry driven process that promotes critical thinking and active citizenship for personal and societal change'" (p. 522). Dover's

inclusion of diverse definitions of the phrase "teaching for social justice" demonstrates their point that it is a personal challenge for educators to take on, but one that can fulfill state standards in the subject area and teach invaluable citizenship skills to students. In social justice pedagogy research, terms such as "active citizenship" and "critical thinking" often arise, suggesting that social justice educational practices are a call to action for students and teachers in addition to meeting state standards and course requirements.

In short, researchers of teaching for social justice agree that social justice involves fairness, agency, and relevance within and outside the classroom (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; CCE Position Statement, 2009; Kraynak, 2018; Sleeter, 2015). Dover (2013) "envisions teaching for social justice as comprising three primary dimensions: curriculum, pedagogy, and social action… an activist stance [that raises] students' awareness of inequity and injustice, and [promotes] social action among students" (pp. 518-519). Therefore, teaching for social justice means that students begin to recognize patterns of injustice and teachers act as guides for students to take action in their communities. Teachers must present materials and provide opportunities for students as they encourage participation in relevant social issues. In turn, teachers must model open discourse about unfair policies and professional ways to advocate for change. Defining "teaching for social justice" is important to this study because it provides context for a social justice approach. In the next section, I analyze pedagogical approaches that demonstrate teaching for social justice specifically in ELA classrooms.

Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching for Social Justice

"English language arts teachers bear the tremendous responsibility of selecting texts that speak to their students' cultural heritage and broaden their respect and appreciation of the heritages of diverse groups" (Boyd, 2014).

Boyd's (2014) perspective on teachers' responsibility resonates with educators who are beginning to reshape their approach to teaching social justice. While careful text selection is an important first step in approaching social justice in an English classroom, Boyd clearly states that teachers must model respect and an appreciation for diversity within their classrooms. Ortega (2021), a celebrated linguist, would agree with Boyd (2014) that English classrooms provide vast opportunities to analyze communities and model social justice advocacy. Ortega conducted a recent study (2021) in which he analyzed teachers in Columbia who took a project-based approach to teaching social justice. Teachers' practical approaches to combating injustices within their community acts as a guide for educators seeking tangible ways to embody justice within their classrooms. In multiple classrooms, students picked an issue that they observed in their own communities, they collected data, created a tri-fold project, and presented viable solutions to combat these injustices in their communities. In reflection, Ortega saw the student demonstrations,

> Not only as classroom projects but also as humanizing pedagogical approaches to teaching English with an action-oriented component. [He] noticed that these projects became the focus of the teachers' day-to-day practice in working to dismantle the roots of violence by providing hope for personal and social transformation. (p. 1149)

Ortega proposes that students from violent communities can derive hope from a project-based social justice approach by recognizing that they can fight against community injustices despite their lack of control over their home lives. Ortega's (2021) study is an excellent example of educators connecting students to their communities by identifying issues in their own world. I will use Ortega (2021) and Boyd's (2014) work as a guide for my study so students can connect social injustices in *Things Fall Apart* as a model text to analyze the world around them. In the following section, I will introduce different pedagogical approaches by experienced educators to demonstrate the diverse ways that educator's model social justice in their classrooms.

Pedagogy Surrounding Oppression and Power Structures

"Pedagogically, [teachers of social justice] create a supportive classroom climate that embraces multiple perspectives, emphasizes critical thinking and inquiry, and promotes students' academic, civic, and personal growth. Finally, they adopt an activist stance, raise students' awareness of inequity and injustice, and promote social action among students" (Dover, 2013, pp. 518-519*).*

Delineating the pedagogy of social justice education requires careful consideration. In the statement above, Dover (2013) describes the pedagogy of social justice education as one that is personalized in approach but centralized in promoting the participation of students in social change. Thus, the pedagogy of social justice education is a collection of teaching strategies that connect students to the world around them by raising awareness and fostering advocacy for social change.

The Conference on English Education (CEE) released a position statement in December of 2009 to define social justice for educators. In the statement, the CCE

mentions the term social justice "is a grounded theory…a process, a framework for research, and a promise" ("Beliefs about Social Justice in English Education," CEE Position Statement, December 2009). By their words, "process" and "promise," they suggest that social justice pedagogy is not only a theoretical approach, but a teaching style and mindset that is based on methodology that fosters critical thinking. Social justice approaches can be considered a process because educators must incorporate modern injustices that change and shift over time into their curriculum. A "promise" indicates that social justice pedagogy must transcend the classroom walls and become a tangible goal in all aspects of the school system, or in other institutions that hold power. Luke (2000) mentions that social justice pedagogy "moves toward an explicit pedagogy of critical vocabularies for talking about what reading and writing and texts and discourses can do in everyday life" (p. 453). By applying social justice to an English classroom, teachers can deepen their understanding of social justice methodology by changing their perspective on school policy, language use, teaching strategies, pedagogical approach, and lesson planning on a deeper level.

Matteson and Boyd (2017) speak to educators "dedicated to social justice, [saying] the goal of teaching becomes promoting equity and helping students to understand the relationship between power and oppression" (p.123). Guiding students through analyzing power structures and recognizing oppression is a powerful tool to introduce social justice issues before modeling advocacy for students. Later, Boyd and Coffey (2021) conducted a study highlighting the ways in which social justice pedagogy calls for a varied, diverse approach. In the introduction to *Critical Social Justice across the Spectrum of Teaching and Learning: Theory and Practice in Communities and*

Classrooms, Boyd and Coffey demonstrate tangible ways to "[combine] a variety of critical pedagogies, teachers can challenge students to engage in social action to improve conditions for their communities" (p. 123). The collection of critical theories relating to institutional injustices, critical teaching communities, civic engagement, and sociocultural literature point to the diverse ways in which educators can effectively take a social justice approach according to their skills and passions.

Furthermore, Carlisle et al. (2006) focus on different types of social oppression and strategies for students to combat oppression. In their 2006 study, Carlisle et al. defines social justice curricula "as [teaching] an understanding of the nature and manifestations of all forms of social oppression; [providing] strategies for intervening in oppressive situations; and [seeking] to facilitate a living and learning environment for the development of liberatory thinking and action" (p. 61). By encouraging free thinking and collaborative solutions in classrooms, teachers model inclusivity and equity. Social justice pedagogy not only opens classrooms to in-depth discussion about course content, but it inspires advocacy outside the classroom. Carlisle (2006) and Boyd and Matteson (2017) each focus on oppression and deconstructing power structures in narratives. This approach is an extremely effective and focused way to implement a social justice curriculum within the classroom.

Other researchers offer specific pedagogical approaches to teaching social justice in English classrooms. Dover (2014) contextually analyzes teachers' preparation prior to teaching lessons with a social justice approach. Dover proposes that participants in their study displayed "curricular creativity and expertise, [reflecting] the contextual nature of teaching for social justice," exposing power structures to students in concrete ways (p.

519). In Dover's findings, teachers of social justice evaluated their own pedagogy and defended that it met College and Career Readiness state standards. Furthermore, Dover mentioned that most of the teachers' lessons encouraged activism. By taking a focused approach to themes such as racism, religious persecution, and gender, teachers were able to connect the reality of injustice to their students in their course content and application. The aforementioned researchers of social justice pedagogy therefore demonstrate careful planning and implementation that leads to student advocacy.

English classrooms are rich in content that illustrates systems of power and oppression. By focusing on social justice in English classrooms, Boyd and Coffey (2021) highlight inequities within the world through a text-centered approach that hones in on injustices within the school system. They acknowledge the unique position that English teachers hold because their subject requires analyzing multiple perspectives that are historically and culturally based. They state, "English language arts teachers bear the tremendous responsibility of selecting texts that speak to their students' cultural heritage and broaden their respect and appreciation of the heritages of diverse groups" (p. 478). Using this to their advantage, English teachers can easily incorporate discussions of (in)justice first in the context of the book, then in students' cultural context. Traditional ways of learning where the teacher is at the center are not unjust by nature, however, by shifting students to the fore, teachers can challenge power hierarchies that may contribute to social injustice. While it may seem a lofty task to balance effective classroom management and student-centered learning, inquiry-based learning is an invaluable tool to incorporate social justice into the power structure in classrooms.

Social Emotional Learning

Another approach to teaching social justice could be through social-emotional learning (SEL). Beard et al. (2021) call upon Zins et al.'s (2004) definition of SEL, "a process where children 'enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important tasks'" (p.6). SEL emphasizes the students' role in the learning environment, encouraging thoughtful decision making that incorporates alternate perspectives on classroom behaviors. A simple example of this could be a young student taking their classmates' book. After the encounter, the teacher calmly asks the student how they would feel if someone took their book. Hopefully, by analyzing their behavior from a different perspective, the student will then make the right choice out of empathy for the student they wronged. Beard et al. express that "teachers are uniquely positioned in many classrooms to be significant and consistent social and emotional role models for students to closely monitor and learn from" (p. 2). Although the above example may seem juvenile, the teacher in this instance is modeling empathy for their student to not just correct a behavior, but shape a more empathetic mindset, which primes the student for social-emotional awareness.

Inquiry-Based Learning

Inquiry-based learning is yet another approach to social justice education. Archer-Kuhn (2020), a professor of social work in Canada, published an article to propose the use of inquiry-based learning (IBL) in social work education. Although the focus of this study is not on English education, the methodology that Archer-Kuhn publishes is an important element to analyze. According to Spronken-Smith et al. (2011), an IBL approach assigns the teacher as a facilitator and the student as the lead role, learning through self-directed inquiry. Archer-Kuhn opposes researchers who argue that IBL is

ineffective by stating, "IBL [aims] to change the relationship, and in doing so, the power between student and teacher… This shift in practice results in shared power between student and teacher" (p. 434). By changing the approach to education to one in which students have agency and responsibility, educators can incorporate social justice into the structure of their classrooms.

As this section demonstrates, there are many effective pedagogical approaches to teaching social justice: delineating power structures, SEL approaches, and Inquiry-Based Learning. These pedagogical approaches challenge students to critically analyze the world around them and prioritize the role of student choice in learning. When teachers allow for student choice, students may begin to take ownership of their learning which can yield a deeper understanding of social justice. In summary, the most successful pedagogical approaches are those that put students at the center of their learning, allowing for student agency and activism. To determine a student-centered approach, the next section is dedicated to student experiences with the social justice approach.

Student Experiences with the Social Justice Approach

"[Sara reflected that] action is key because . . . you can talk about all this stuff as researchers, but if you're not implementing or doing anything, it's not really worth that much" (Spires, 2021, p. 226).

In this study, I highlight student experiences with social justice approaches. It is imperative to include student responses in this study because this study is not about me as an educator, but about my students and their experiences. Although there are many studies that focus on teacher or administrator experiences with social justice, fewer studies have focused on the student experience.

Although Coffey and Fulton's (2020) study are an important illustration of a Project Based Learning (PBL) approach to teaching for social justice, they do not specifically include student quotes in their research findings. Coffey and Fulton created a social justice project, adopting Kemmis' (2006) participatory action research approach, which includes planning for change, acting and observing said change, and reflecting upon the change as a researcher. Coffey observed Fulton's 8th grade lessons on social justice called the "Responsible Change Project" where he used a variety of methods for students to critically think about problems in their communities. They defend the merits of their study by saying "students participating in critical service-learning must learn to view themselves as agents of social change and "use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities" (p. 11). This multi-layered approach led to many of Fulton's desired outcomes. Students demonstrated agency and care in their own TED Talks and analysis of TED Talk speeches. While Coffey does not include an explicit statement from a student, she indirectly states, "students saw that speakers were knowledgeable and passionate not just because they conducted research or took a class, but because they were in some way personally connected to the subject about which they were speaking" (p. 17). Their study demonstrates that social justice approaches are broad in spectrum and specific to the interests of the educator and students. However, their salient point is that connecting students to the community "provides context for literacy learning that is student driven, rather than teacher-assigned, as well as relevant and powerful" (p. 15). If Coffey had included a few direct quotes from Fulton's 8th grade students, findings from the Responsible Change Project would be more convincing for social justice educators to imitate in their own classrooms.

Authors such as Spires et al. (2021), Wang (2015), and Boyd (2014), effectively include student responses to their social justice approaches. Spires et al. (2021) highlight student experiences by including direct quotes in their findings section. They frame social action as "global literacy" (Yoon et al., 2018) in which students become aware of global issues. The purpose of Spires et al.'s (2021) study was to observe how students made global connections to local issues. In their post-interview findings, Spires et al. include student responses as direct quotes, student work (infographics,) and a chart of student interview transcripts. The inclusion of student interactions in this study was personally impactful because it demonstrated precise feedback and highlighted the students' experiences. In Table 1, a student mentioned "action is key because . . . you can talk about all this stuff as researchers, but if you're not implementing or doing anything, it's not really worth that much" (p. 226). This student not only reiterated the point of the project but answered Spires et al.'s research question. Researchers could easily state that their research question was answered but without student voice, one could assume the researcher is biased and lacking proof in their study results.

Similarly, Boyd's (2014) dissertation reflects student experiences through many verbatim examples from classroom interactions. Boyd studied three teachers and their students during the implementation of a social justice unit. For each teacher, Boyd explains their pedagogy and student responses to their social justice approaches. In Etta's classroom, one student stated: "'I just like her teaching method. It's like so, she relates with the students more" (p. 76). Boyd mentions that this student was only one example of Etta's pedagogy shaping her relationship with students. Building a relationship with students through activating student voice and choice illustrates the mindfulness, time, and

care it takes to successfully introduce and model social justice to students. One student mentioned "there's nothing you can do, as kids," when Etta addressed her action component in this study (p. 100). Boyd reiterates that there is no perfect implementation or teacher for social justice, and student attitudes about activism were realistic and they were engaged. However, students displayed a sense of awareness and care for others.

Due to the nature of this study and my limited time frame, it will also be difficult to display advocacy or activism. I plan to implement social justice approaches for the whole semester post-study, leading up to a Social Justice Project where students collaborate to take social action as part of their semester final. Although Coffey and Fulton's (2020) article informs my pedagogical approach to teaching *Things Fall Apart*, I model my findings section after Boyd (2014) and Spires et al. (2021) to better account for the experiences of my students in this study. In the next section, I will highlight the lack of literature surrounding teaching for social justice in private Christian education while commending researchers who are doing this work.

Social Justice Education in Private (Christian) Schools

"Where the rights of persons of any faith are not secure, no one's rights are secure"

(Secretary of State Albright, 1997).

"Persecuted people of faith are often disproportionately poor, women, and members of

marginalized subgroups" (D.R. Hodge, p.178).

As illustrated in the sections above, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to social justice education and there is very little research on teaching social justice in private Christian ELA classrooms. In this section, I connect Krayak's idea that social justice is a Christian duty to other researchers as I explore the limitations that private Christian ELA

educators might experience when trying to teach for social justice. As stated in the introduction, Christian educators are often operating under the mindset of "mission work" as a supplement for social justice advocacy. There are also misunderstandings around the purpose and term "social justice" in Christian education. I present researchers such as Luna De La Rosa and Jun (2019), Valadez and Mirci (2015), Hodge (2007), and DiPietro and Dickenson (2021) who demonstrate ways to apply social justice in a Christian setting.

Luna De La Rosa et al. (2019) are researchers and educators in Christian colleges around the United States. They highlight struggles with diversity education in their colleges, which they feel are common across Christian educational institutions. Researchers state "there is a dangerous disconnect between knowing about diversity and understanding diversity in order to act responsibly in a diverse world" (p. 359). They argue that this lack of understanding leads to a disconnection between Christian students' academic and spiritual life. This perspective sheds light on my study because I see a lack of scholarly research among Christian educators in grades 9-12th. There is an obvious focus on spiritual life in private Christian school bylaws met with a lack of dialogue surrounding social justice issues. This could be the result of Christian college educators having more opportunity to publish research studies on social justice. High School English teachers in the private sector may be attempting this work, but there is little scholarship suggesting this type of advocacy. Luna De La Rosa et al. (2019) ask Christian educators:

> What is Christian higher education's stance on social justice? A diversity
> framework that focuses on awareness too often allows for passivity… [In order to

build] communities that are successful at improving conditions and resolving

problems, individuals need to appreciate many cultures, establish relationships

with people from cultures other than their own, and build strong alliances with

different cultural groups. (pp. 361-3633)

Luna De La Rosa et al. demonstrate the same frustration with passive awareness of social

issues in Christian schools. While their study has been conducted at the collegiate level,

passivity and lack of diversity education is an issue commonly recognized by private

Christian educators. Hodge (2017) also argues against Christian passivity, stating:

"Persecuted people of faith are often disproportionately poor, women, and members of

marginalized subgroups" (p. 178). Hodge distinguishes vulnerable populations to suggest

that Christians cannot separate themselves wholly from intervening on the behalf of

women, impoverished communities, or minorities in matters of government. Instead,

Hodge expresses that it is our responsibility as Christians to both provide and advocate

for others.

As Christian educators, our faith aligns with social justice advocacy, but it is often

called "mission work." Mission work is usually a requirement for students, limiting its

impactfulness and purpose for students. If students were able to choose their own cause

as a class and partner with an organization that advocates for a social justice issue, I

believe that students would engage in active citizenship, have opportunities to practice

their own religions and moral beliefs (which may be different than Christianity), and

create change in their communities.

Valadez and Mirchi (2015) speak to the issues surrounding Christian educators

teaching for social justice. Specifically, Valadez and Mirchi address three issues for

educators seeking to create a socially just education model that combines social justice pedagogy with Catholic education. They determined the three areas of struggle are: "(a) the definition of socially just education, (b) explaining a vision for establishing socially just schools, and (c) providing a practical guide for educational leaders to promote social justice ideals… As Pieper (2003) declared: 'the good [person] is above all the just [person]'" (p. 64). In this study, Valadez and Mirchi argue that striving for justice is a Christian virtue. By advocating for justice, Christians can be considered "good people" who fulfill God's will for mankind. Similar to my literature review, Valadez and Mirchi define social justice and the language they use in the context of their study. Like Kraynak (2018), they mention John Rawls' redistributive model, which combats poverty through first examining the roots of oppression in society. Researchers then express how schools should demonstrate their "concern for the needs of the 'other' in society is in line with social justice principles seeking to develop individuals with a concern for our neighbors and a commitment to justice and fairness" (p. 64). This is important to my study because Valadez and Mirchi (2015) base their social justice model on biblical evidence (Mark 12: 30-31; Corinthians 13:4-8, 13) and modern pedagogical practices; blending research with faith in practical ways that are difficult to find for Christian educators creating a social justice unit.

One of Valadez and Mirchi's salient issues with Christian schools is their emphasis on dominant cultures that don't respect diversity or completely ignore the beauty of diversity. Valadez and Mirchi (2015) use Taylor's (2007) research to claim that "eradicating the privileging of dominant cultures would serve to honor and recognize the cultures of marginalized groups, leading to the creation of a just and democratic society"

(p. 165). This is a direct way to combat injustices in Christian schools by empowering students to recognize and cherish cultural differences within their schools. There are many pedagogical strategies to enrich curriculums with diversity. As Valadez and Mirchi demonstrate, students may not be aware of the privileges that private education offers or that their classmates might come from different cultural, economic, or religious backgrounds.

Valadez and Mirchi list ten strategies for Christian educators to incorporate social justice in their schools. In the beginning, Valadez and Mirchi indicate that educators make students aware of the word "virtue" and their calling for standing up for virtue, or justice. Since Christian education leans heavily on stakeholders such as parents and churches or ministries, they encourage educators involve stakeholders such as administrators, other teachers, parents, and ministers in a discussion surrounding social (in)justice. Afterwards, they encourage educators to personalize their units according to the cultural or historical background students are studying to maintain academic rigor and social justice advocacy. In the following section, Valadez and Mirchi challenge teachers to create a liberating school environment by learning the difference between charity and social justice through service learning instead of donation opportunities. This can be accomplished by providing "students the opportunity to abandon superficial thinking, including stereotypical assumptions about the poor. It encourages students to foster a more complex perception of the world and to develop a more systemic view of the root causes of social injustice" (p. 172). Their distinction of social justice and charity is vital to this study because mission work misses the point of advocating for the least of these.

Valadez and Mirchi's last four strategies involve pedagogy such as Project Based Inquiry, creating a cultural responsiveness, conditioning teachers and students for social justice pedagogy, guiding teachers through reflection, and arguing that teachers need to recognize systemic structures (tackling the system, not just an outcome of the corrupt systems in place) in order to change their thinking for the long run (pp. 170-174). The ten strategies above serve as a framework for this study because Valadez and Mirchi (2015) illustrate the ways in which Christian educators can advocate and educate for justice while upholding their own spiritual beliefs. In the next section, I discuss my methodology for this study. I provide details of my students and context as well as my data collection processes for teaching for social justice considering the literature review.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

"Responsive interviewing is intended to communicate that qualitative interviewing is a dynamic and iterative process, not a set of tools to be applied mechanically… Qualitative research is not simply learning about the topic, but also learning what is important to those being studied" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 15).

In this study, I used qualitative research methods to gather information about student experiences while reading the novel, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. I implemented a social justice approach during my instruction of the novel. I begin this section by discussing my context and study participants. I then introduce my classroom instructional strategies as this study covers one whole unit of my curriculum. Next, I spend time detailing my data collection methods which include two student surveys, informal student journals, my personal teacher/researcher journal, my classroom discussion, and activities that were formative assessments, and interviews. Lastly, I discuss my approach to data analysis to identify common themes across student interviews, discussions, and assignments.

Participants

The participants in this study are students in my ninth grade, English I World Literature College Preparatory (standard) spring semester course. Much of this class are what our school refers to as "Lifers," students who have been at our school from kindergarten to ninth grade. For this study, I will consider those who have been here for 3+ years to be categorized as "Advanced Exposure to private Christian education." The other half of my students (referred to as "New") have transferred from public schools, smaller private schools, or charter schools in this area. Although my school is known for

smaller class sizes, this class is only composed of two female students and eleven male students, which is considered a smaller than average class. In my private Christian school, it is not culturally acceptable to ask students how they self-identify due to parental concern and religious affiliation. Therefore, students have been categorized as male or female according to what has been documented in our system called RenWeb.

I chose to analyze this class because they are the most racially, religiously, and culturally diverse class I have had the pleasure of teaching at my school in three years. These students are curious about the world, passionate about their differences, and they process information in unique ways. Students have expressed interest prior to this study in societal issues such as gender inequality and racism. I have developed a deep relationship with these students, and many have expressed feeling most comfortable in my classroom to learn, be heard, and voice their opinions. Furthermore, this class is equally composed of New students, "Lifers," and Advanced Exposure students, which allows for an in-depth analysis across groups. Considering my qualitative research approach, I felt that this class would best exemplify the experience of teaching for social justice as a high school English teacher in a private Christian school.

Researcher Positionality

Morgan (2011) states researchers should be creating positionality statements because "it helps the investigator become aware of presuppositions, biases, values, theoretical stances, and/or previous experiences, which could "cloud" the investigator's mind" (p. 14). Rubin and Rubin (2021) and Roulston (2010) believe the researcher should certainly be viewed as a participant of a study because researchers are, according to Rubin and Rubin, "listening to hear meaning" (p. 14).

With this in mind, I am a fourth-year English teacher with experience in teaching both public and private school. Like many teachers in the U.S., I am a White woman. I have vast experience with teaching diverse students, especially those with learning disabilities, primarily in the South. I am a professing Christian which shapes every aspect of my life and core values. While I work at a Christian school, I choose to apply the same principles from my experiences teaching in public school. One example of this is that I maintain professionalism by keeping my political and religious affiliations out of classroom conversations. I do integrate Bible verses and stories as cultural context when teaching my students literature around the world, but I attempt to not let my personal beliefs shape my pedagogy. Although my private Christian school does not require that we follow state standards, I choose to follow all North Carolina Common Core ELA standards in my lesson planning as I did in public school, especially since I contributed to the county-wide curriculum as a first-year teacher. In addition, in my context, I am required to integrate Biblical Standards (Appendix E) set by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI).

Context

I teach at a private Christian school near Charlotte, North Carolina. On public record, our school population is composed of 8.0% students of color. In my classes, there are less than 2% percent Black students, 5% percent Hispanic, 8% percent Asian, and 85% White according to our RenWeb system. Students' socioeconomic backgrounds range from millionaire families to middle-class families who are offered academic or athletic scholarships to our school. About 20% of our students receive financial scholarships. Compared to other Christian private schools in the area, we are recognized

as having the most extracurricular and sports activity and the largest student population. We have a special education department who serves roughly 4% of our students. Although some Christian schools require students to profess to be Christian by signing a Statement of Faith, ours does not. Our students range from Atheist, Agnostic, or non-religious with most students claiming to be Catholic or Protestant. From my observations, students who believe differently but are required to attend the mandatory Bible classes and Chapel do not feel comfortable being perceived as a "non-believer" by some teachers or peers. In class conversations about Chapel and in some student interviews, students expressed feeling isolated or uncomfortable if their beliefs did not match the beliefs of the Chapel speaker or of their classmates. The families at my school are vocally conservative, but there seems to be more political diversity among the students from what we discuss in my Composition I and English I classes.

Since I have taught in both public and private school, I have been able to see many differences in academic rigor, diversity, professionalism, professional development for teachers, school culture, and the challenges that accompany mixing religion with academics. I am a Christian educator who is passionate about teaching to state standards. In my own experience at my private school, I felt that I was not growing as an educator in a school environment that gave me so much freedom in the classroom with little to no supervision or professional development. In public school, I felt challenged and accountable to push myself to be a better educator. I decided to get my master's at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to push myself to be a better educator and well-rounded person. As soon as I began my studies, I remembered my passion for social justice. I also realized the need for social justice education in private Christians schools. I

have been discontented for some time with aspects of Christian private school systems. My professors provided opportunities to become aware of the specific injustices in my school and professional advice as I developed my teaching paradigm through class assignments, materials, and class discussions. Prior to creating a Thesis Advisory Board, I met with Dr. Meghan Barnes, and we narrowed my broad focus on teaching for social justice to using social justice approaches in one English unit using *Things Fall Apart* as a model text to introduce students to social (in)justice.

Classroom Instruction

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe is a popular novel from 1962 that follows the tragic hero, Okonkwo, through his journey during the post-colonial conquest of Nigeria by European professing Christians in the 1890's. Okonkwo's hamartia, or fatal flaws, are pride and the fear of failure. Okonkwo's journey is told in three parts: a collection of backstories of his tribe and their customs, the fall of his family and their exile due to a "female *ochu"* mistake Okonkwo committed, and his return to Umuofia during the arrival of the first Christian missionaries and British conquerors. Things begin to fall apart in Umuofia as the Christians make way for the British government to essentially wipe out Okonkwo's culture, values, and religion. After his son converts to Christianity, Okonkwo tragically hangs himself because he loses hope.

Through storytelling, Achebe seeks to bring honor and respect back to Nigerian culture in response to books such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. *Things Fall Apart* was on the list of literature that my school allows into the ninth-grade classroom, therefore I was not going against school policy to teach this novel. I chose this novel for my study because it allows me to introduce my students to cultures and religions vastly

different from their own. In *Things Fall Apart,* students witnessed the detrimental effects of disrespect, denial, and misunderstanding. In this context, students began to understand the need for social justice as they applied it to themes such as racism, religious persecution, and gender roles that Achebe masterfully crafted in his debut novel.

Pedagogical Rationale

My instructional choices when teaching this novel are largely based on studies by Boyd (2014 & 2017), Coffey and Fulton (2020), Dover (2013), Kraynak (2018), Valadez and Mirchi (2015), the CEE Position Statement (2009), and Grant (2016).

Dover (2013) defines a teachers' role in social justice pedagogy as "[creating] a supportive classroom climate that embraces multiple perspectives, emphasizes critical thinking and inquiry, and promotes students' academic, civic, and personal growth" (pp. 518-519). Throughout my instruction of this unit, I modeled social justice to my students with personal examples, mini-lessons, and by building deeper relationships with each of my students by collaboratively and critically analyzing their views on social justice and what they felt was unjust in their communities. Post-unit, we engaged in discussions about civic action and personal advocacy.

I use some strategies from Coffey and Fulton's study (2020) as a guide for connecting students to their communities during the qualitative interviews which "provides context for literacy learning that is student driven, rather than teacher-assigned, as well as relevant and powerful" (p. 15). I followed their guidelines by incorporating

student choice in identifying social injustice and asking students to work together to connect the issue to what they observe in their worlds and communities.

Unit Overview

During the *Things Fall Apart* unit, students were placed into groups based on my experience with their ability to be productive with certain classmates and their level of exposure to private Christian school. Students were given the opportunity to select their own societal issue and apply it to the text during their group work sessions. I relied upon student choice for essay, journal, and discussion prompts to enhance engagement and my own careful direct instruction to create rigorous and relevant lessons based upon social justice issues.

Students were required to read the book, participate in class discussions around social justice, and complete various assignments from January 10th to January 28th, 2022. In the last few days, students completed their final essay where they identified social injustice in *Things Fall Apart* and applied those issues to injustices in their society or communities (Appendix A.) I did not require students to select the same societal issues as their group did previously. I wanted students to have complete freedom to write about what they felt most passionately about for this assignment.

Data Collection Methods

I obtained IRB approval through the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to conduct student interviews with minor participants. Per the IRB, I use pseudonyms to protect my participants and the context of this study. The data collected for this study included a pre-survey and a post-survey, student reading journals, class assignments

during reading, a final essay that asked students to identify one type of social injustice for the unit, and qualitative student "exit" interviews about social injustice.

Student Surveys

I began this study by passing out a survey to students (included in Appendix F). My survey questions followed a Likert scale of "Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree." I asked questions such as "if people are suffering, it is my job to stand up for them," "To be considered feminine, one must be good at care-taking and submitting to authority," and "if someone has a different religion than me, I should try to change their mind." The questions were created to determine student perspectives, their values, and their level of exposure to social injustices. My surveys were created in the same manner as an Anticipation Guide where the guide introduces students to general, open-ended topics prior to reading. Post-reading, teachers typically redistribute and discuss student responses to their Anticipation Guides. Students were required to provide a short rationale after answering each question. Students also filled out a post-unit survey, which was the same as the first survey.

Both the pre- and post-unit surveys helped me to address Research Question 1: What are the challenges and limitations for educators teaching literature from a social justice lens specifically within a private Christian school? Since I required students to provide a brief rationale after each question on the surveys, I was able to better understand how and why they chose a particular answer. These survey responses also shed light on how student religious affiliation influenced their responses and understanding of the questions. By coding the language and number of "Strongly Disagree/Strongly Agree" responses in my findings, I was able to compare the pre-survey

(before reading) and the post-survey (after reading) to assess the challenges and limitations of teaching about social justice in a private Christian school setting.

Student and Researcher Journals

In addition to these surveys, I assigned daily student journals (Appendix D) with discussion questions provoking thoughts about gender roles (or discrimination), racism, and religious persecution. The student journals also helped me to address my first research question.

Additionally, I collected data through personal reflection journals that I maintained throughout my planning and instruction of *Things Fall Apart*. These reflections were composed at least weekly beginning in the planning stage prior to the spring semester. I was interested in documenting my perspective as an educator using a social justice approach for the first time. My personal reflections add to the conversation about limitations in a private Christian setting and the challenges as an educator using a social justice approach. As presented in Chapter 2, I also addressed my first research question through my review of literature.

Student Interviews

Following the unit, I conducted student interviews from January 27th to January 28th during class (questions included in Appendix B and direct quotes included in the Findings Section). Using a qualitative interview method, I created a script to assure students knew why I was recording them and to obtain their acknowledgment of the recording device without them stating their names or any personal identifiers. The audio recordings were uploaded to an encrypted Google Drive Folder that only I may access.

The recordings will be destroyed after the final submission of my thesis in May of 2022. For my English I CP class, every student signed the consent and assent forms to participate in this study. I asked questions that pertained to social injustice themes in *Things Fall Apart*, student opinions on if a social justice approach belongs in an English classroom, and questions that asked students to think critically about social injustice in their communities. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. I audio recorded each interview.

My interview style was semi-structured in nature. Roulston (2010) states the interviewer "follow up/probes…[and] initiates questions in response to the interviewee" (*Table 1.1,* pp. 14-15). While I did follow a structured set of questions during interviews, I also asked students follow-up questions throughout the interview, prompting them for more specific answers by using their own definitions of (in)justice. My interview strategy is a theory elaboration with a narrowly focused scope (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In short, I selected the narrow theme of social (in)justice for my students to analyze in *Things Fall Apart* and in doing so, I analyze what injustices students focus on in the qualitative interview.

The interviews allowed me to address my second research question, which asked: How do students respond to an intentional social justice approach to literature in a private (Christian) English I classroom? Specifically, these interviews were aimed at learning more about:

- *Students' assumptions about religious persecution before the unit.*
- *Students' understanding of gender roles after the unit.*
- *Students' questions about racism after the unit.*

- *Students' perceptions of the purpose or learning goals of the unit.*

Most of my findings include data from the student qualitative interviews. The interview questions guided students through a model of social justice thinking by first addressing their own backgrounds (age, experiences in a private school, etc.). I then asked students to define social justice in their own words, facilitating a conversation about their exposure to these issues. Students were asked to share their experiences with learning about social justice in an English classroom and defend their beliefs about whether it should be implemented in an English classroom.

All the data I collected addressed my research questions in purposeful ways. First, I used the same terminology that we covered in class for the surveys, essay prompts, and interview questions. Students became familiar with and used the terms "social justice," "racism," "religious persecution," and "gender roles" throughout the unit. The only time students had less shared understanding of these terms was when they completed their first survey. This was done in order to assess the effectiveness of the unit by comparing their level of understanding and exposure to social justice prior to and after teaching this unit. Each question on the survey addressed a different aspect of social injustice in the novel, *Things Fall Apart* (i.e., religious persecution, gender roles, and racism.) My first research question addressed how students respond to an intentional social justice approach to literature in a private Christian English I classroom. The final survey shed light on their level of awareness and how/if the novel itself and the pedagogical unit influenced their answers. I also gathered information from class discussions, group work activities, and the final draft of their essays to add depth to my during-reading data for my findings section. I addressed my second research question through qualitative student interviews.

Data Analysis

To address my first research question, I read extensively about social justice pedagogy, and I used self-reflection journals to detail my experience teaching social justice in a private Christian school. Additionally, I analyzed informal class assignments such as the student reading journals to glean any information about the challenges of teaching this unit. Gathering this data helped me address Research Question 1. Student journals were helpful in addressing this question because they provided insight into how students responded to various pedagogical strategies I used during the unit. To address this question, I noted commonalities across student journals and used that to contextualize the data presented in my findings.

To address my second research question, I used thematic coding according to Braun and Clarke (2006), to analyze my qualitative interviews with students. I began by journaling my first impression of student interviews before reviewing transcripts and audio recordings. Afterwards, I began the process of coding for emerging themes across student interviews. I chose to analyze the interviews of all thirteen students in my English I CP class. Braun and Clark (2006) encourage researchers to sort their codes, therefore I sorted mine into two levels using my second research question.

To analyze the survey data, I tabulated the number of "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree" Likert-scale responses in the pre-survey and compared them to the number of "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree" responses in the post-survey. Then, I moved on to coding their open-ended responses from the two surveys by identifying the keywords and phrases in each response. I grouped those codes into three categories: commonalities, differences, and experiences. I created a chart to compare keywords and

responses between the two surveys and the three categories of students: "Lifers," new students, and advanced exposure to public school. After coding all these responses, I looked for commonalities before analyzing student interviews, which is the bulk of my findings section.

Next, I turned to the interviews to address the four parts of my second research question: 1) Religious persecution, 2) Gender roles, 3) Racism, and 4) Students' perceptions of the purpose or learning goals of the unit. I organized the interview data into groups based on students' educational backgrounds: "Lifers," New students, students with Advanced Exposure to private school. I used coding to identify commonalities, differences, and experiences across students' interview data. In the findings section, I separate my personal reflections (addressing research question 1) from student responses (addressing research question 2). To provide a holistic view of this unit and my pedagogical choices during this study, I include both my experience and student experiences, which is addressed in the discussion and limitations section.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

"Interviewers [should] maintain careful records of what they did, saw, and felt

and include portions of this record in their final write-ups so the reader can determine

where and how the researcher went beyond what the interviews said" (Rubin & Rubin,

2005, p. 76).

In this section, I discuss my data and findings using direct student quotes from

students' pre- and post-surveys, reading journals, class assignments, and mainly their

qualitative interviews. I also weave my personal reflection journals throughout the

findings. As a teacher-researcher, I feel it is necessary to indicate my revisions, failures,

and successes which contributes to my first research question: limitations and challenges

in using social justice approaches in a private Christian school environment. All student

names mentioned in the findings section are pseudonyms to protect their privacy. When I

include direct student quotes, I have indicated linking phrases or grammar corrections by

brackets. I have chosen to leave quotes unaltered beyond what I felt as a researcher would

distract from the results of this study.

Pre-Surveys and Post-Surveys

Both the pre- and post-unit surveys helped me to address research question 1.

Since I required students to provide a brief rationale after each question on the surveys, I

was able to better understand their answers. While taking the first survey, students

expressed that they were swayed by the language of the questions, or they indicated they

were confused how to answer some questions. Afterwards, I compared their responses

from their pre-survey to each question on their post-survey. My purpose was 1) to assess

their worldviews and level of exposure to social (in)justices and 2) to identify if students changed their responses or their rationale language after the unit.

Commonalities

In this study, 86% of students demonstrated more empathy for those in need in their post-survey rationales compared to their pre-survey rationales and responses. I measured empathy through student word choice; stronger language such as "we must" or "we should stand up" indicated more passionate responses and weaker language (using words such as "good" or "nice,") suggested less empathy in the subject matter. Stronger language suggest that action was an imperative, whereas the weaker language suggested that action was preferable, but still just an option. Two students also responded in the pre-survey that it's "good" to help people and two expressed it was "nice" to help. In the post-survey, the same students used stronger language for the first prompt, by stating "I want people to feel safe," "it is always good to stand up," or "we can/should help others." I paid close attention to their rationales especially since this book covered difficult social justice topics in unique ways.

Surprisingly, most of the class drastically shifted their responses to my survey questions at the end of the unit. Specifically, students changed their rationale language to align with the following statements: 1) If people are suffering, it is my job to stand up for them, 2) I am accepting of other religions, and 3) I am interested in other cultures. There was one student outlier who seemed to not give the second survey as much thought, which reflects his sporadic efforts on classwork. Another student, Chester, kept his responses to each survey (Strongly Agree, Strongly Disagree, Agree, and Disagree) the same, but I was able to identify some shift in language where he demonstrated a more

open-minded approach on certain prompts such as "it is important to learn about different religions," and "I am accepting of other religions" in his post-survey responses.

Additionally, seven out of thirteen students wrote some variation of "helping those who suffer is not my job" in the pre-survey in response to my first prompt: If people are suffering, it is my job to stand up for them. Four of those students wrote on their post-survey: "I will help," "It's the right thing to do," "stand up for others," "if they did not put it upon themselves, then I would," and "helping people out is right." This data indicated to me that some type of injustice in the novel resonated with students whether it was through our group work, activities, or our real-world connections during discussions. Another possibility is that students had become more aware of suffering during instruction or that they had a deeper comprehension of the definition of social (in)justice by the end of this unit.

Another commonality I noticed was that many students responded to the second prompt, "I am accepting of other religions", with strong language in the pre-survey, but gave the impression on the post-survey that they had become more open-minded. Four Lifers in the pre-survey vehemently stated that other religions were "wrong" or some variation of that "other people's religion should be proven wrong with logic." In the post-survey, three Lifers and one student with Advanced Exposure to private school shifted their responses to say that they "respect all religions," they "respect other religions," or "we should hear each other out and respect each other." Chester was one of my most adamant students against expressing empathy in the pre-survey results, but in the post-survey he indicated that it "breaks [his] heart to see others without the hope of Christ, but [he] is accepting of their final decision." I believe that these responses were a result of

deep literary analysis during reading. *Things Fall Apart* casts blame in both religious groups, the Igbo people and the Christians.

I wasn't entirely surprised by the shift in language between the pre- and post-surveys, but I was excited to see most of the class demonstrate more open-mindedness towards other religions in the sense that they felt it was more beneficial to listen to others. Roberta (Lifer) and Billy (Advanced Exposure) both indicated that it's important to learn about other religions to "not offend others." I believe Roberta and Billy mentioned the importance of not offending others because of our discussion about Mr. Brown in the novel. In chapter 21 of *Things Fall Apart,* Mr. Brown discusses Christianity with Akunna, modeling a way to civilly discuss religion. Achebe indicates that "Mr. Brown preached against such excess of zeal…so [he] came to be respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on its faith" (p. 178). The students spent some time in class analyzing this scene to identify what elements made the discussion productive. They came to the conclusion that Mr. Brown was a good example of respect and treading softly meant that he displayed humanity where Mr. Smith, the next missionary, did not.

Differences

There were a few main differences among responses. For one, my eleven male students indicated on their pre-survey a neutral stance on the statement "to be considered masculine, one must be strong and a good leader." However, in their rationale for "to be considered feminine, one must be good at care-taking and submitting to authority," they felt more strongly than the females that femininity does not mean that women should be good at either. Jason answered in his post-survey that women who are "single mothers [must] also be the masculine model." Sammy mentioned that "a strong man should be a

good leader [but] women should be able to do whatever they want." My two female students, Roberta and Beatrice, indicated that "a masculine person can be whoever they want to be," and "anyone can be a good leader." In my analysis, it seemed that the females were more reserved in their rationale regarding their own sex, indicating more freedoms for men in regard to what should be considered "masculine." While there were only 2 female participants (15%), the 11 male students (81%) advocated for women to define themselves however they wanted while the females took a more neutral stance on both genders. It is possible that my male students may have provided a stronger rationale based on my influence as a female teacher. However, I know that three of my male students were raised by single mothers and many of my male students have indicated throughout the unit that their mother means a lot to them through various assignments. I believe that influenced their responses more than my influence as a female educator.

The most noticeable difference between student responses was regarding the third statement: "I am interested in different cultures." Many students displayed the same short response, "yes" or "no." It surprised me that so many students chose not to provide a rationale for this question and their responses varied greatly. This was posted as question number eight on the ten-question survey, so perhaps students became fatigued by the final question. Perhaps students gave me the response that they believed I would desire simply because I'm their teacher and I introduced a novel based in Nigeria. However, Sammy indicated that he liked "'Merica culture best" on both the pre- and post-survey while Chester answered in both surveys, he is more interested in "domestic issues [of other countries] than culture." I discovered that 81% of students shifted their language

from neutral answers on the pre-survey to variations of "I like to learn," "it is interesting," "sure," and "it's good to understand" in their post-survey response.

Experiences

In the surveys, I did not provide space for students to answer any questions about their experiences with my social justice approach for *Things Fall Apart*. In my personal journal, I mentioned it may be a good idea to add onto the post-survey in the future to gauge student experiences in an informal way. However, I interpreted student experiences by their subtle language shifts in their post-survey rationales. In their own words, students provided physical data that indicates their willingness to be more open–minded; especially since three students mentioned that having an open mind was important in their post-survey. This experience also shed light for me as their teacher on their core beliefs regarding religion, gender roles, and views on social justice.

Student Reading Journals

To further address research question 1, I assigned student reading journals as a daily review/warm-up. I was most interested in students demonstrating a relevant and specific application of social injustice in *Things Fall Apart*. Across the student reading journals, I was able to identify a number of commonalities and experiences, but there were no significant differences. Therefore, I only address commonalities and experiences in this section.

Commonalities

I quickly realized that some days, students took these warm-ups seriously as they crafted thoughtful responses. I was also pleasantly surprised that adding quotes from Achebe's book for context in my prompts aided students in their understanding of the question. For example, I modeled each prompt after the one below:

Chapter 7-9 Prompt	"But it was as silly as all women's stories" (Achebe 75). This quote says a lot about Okonkwo's views on women and their roles in society. • What is he saying about women? Does this accurately reflect Igbo views? • How does this align with your views on women and their roles in society?

I heard students repeating the quote aloud several times as they began to work on answering my questions. Students were able to apply the quote to a specific situation and accurately describe Okonkwo's views on women, many strongly expressing their disgust of this view. Students also indicated that Okonkwo's views were more extreme than the Igbo people, but that society had, according to Roberta, "raised him to believe this was okay." Sebastian interjected that "honor was more important than your name [which] means everything back then." I asked students to share their responses before turning in their journals. This led to a productive class-wide discussion about how Okonkwo's fears of appearing weak, or womanly, as we'd discussed during reading the previous day are maximized by a society that views women as less valuable than men. Joseph beautifully articulated this, claiming:

> Okonkwo does not see women as equal; he believes women are equal to weakness. This is like an Igbo point of view. This does not align with my views, because I believe how women are probably valued more in current society.

Joseph accurately identifies Okonkwo's toxic masculinity when he mentions "women are equal to weakness." There were many instances in class where we stopped reading and analyzed Okonkwo's language. I often asked students to list Okonkwo's adjectives for describing women. I noted in my personal reflections that the results of the essays and activities previously mentioned should be documented as responses to research question two pertaining to student experiences. I witnessed many shaking heads or frustrated sighs when Okonkwo talked negatively about women. Joseph was adamant about how he disagreed with Okonkwo and for what reasons.

Experiences

One of the biggest challenges was that some days, my A Block class misunderstood my prompts and it led to poor journal responses. As I've indicated to my students, in my class, a poor journal response entails a short response that doesn't address the question(s) asked or indirectly relates to the question without fully answering it. Where students became stuck in the example above was in the last question; how does this align with your view of women? Many students simply wrote "it doesn't," or "women can do whatever they want." In hindsight, I should have circled back during a class discussion and prompted for a deeper response that would have yielded less division between students and the novel. At times, I felt that students focused on the stark or obvious differences between their culture and Nigerian culture more than similarities. As the facilitator during group work, I strove to create questions that caused students to compare rather than contrast injustices in our society with Okonkwo's culture. In their qualitative interviews and final essays, the majority of students chose to focus on gender

roles and inequalities, which may be a result of their reading journals and class discussions.

Class Assignments

The major assignments that I analyzed included student group work and students' final essays on the book. In this section, I review findings from each of these data sources, with attention to the commonalities, differences, and experiences associated with each.

Student Group Work

In preparation for their essays on social (in)justices in *Things Fall Apart,* students were put into groups diversified by their level of exposure to the private Christian school system ("Lifers," advanced exposure, new students). I handed out strips of paper and asked students to define the word at the top of their paper. Words included social justice, biblical justice, religious persecution, racism, and gender roles. Students were then asked to find a specific example from the novel *Things Fall Apart* to add to their paper. Following, students described an example of the concept from the world, and I allowed them to use their iPads for research for this part. Additionally, students were asked to connect the concept to their own lives or communities as a group. My purpose was twofold: to prepare them for the essay and, ultimately, their qualitative interviews and to connect the novel to the world around them so they could identify a justice issue that they were passionate about (research question 1).

I acted as a facilitator during this activity, answering questions when asked and simply listening or minimally contributing to their discussion when they were stuck. As I circled the room, I heard students delegating the work and helping each other out. I also

overheard deep discussions while students diligently reached a general consensus as a group. The only part students struggled with during this activity was connecting the concept to their lives. I did not notice any major differences between the groups of students; therefore, I will move on to commonalities.

Commonalities

One group of "Lifers" defined social justice as "justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within society." They applied this to *Things Fall Apart* because in that society, "women had less social justice than men." When I asked them to revise their statement and be more specific, they added that women weren't allowed to take part in formal ceremonies or decision making, leading to less privileges. This group defended that women and men are equal in the United States. In my personal reflection journal, I stated that I should have asked students to spend more time on that question or perhaps research their claim because their short answer did not match previous class discussions. As demonstrated in their personal connection, "we agree all adults deserve the same social justice," they struggled with grounding the definition in their realities. Another idea I listed in my own personal reflection journal was that this assignment lacked components of advocacy or brainstorming solutions to injustice.

Furthermore, I asked a group of students who mostly had advanced exposure to private school to define Biblical justice because our Headmaster had recently stated in a staff meeting that the term "social justice" is something he does not like, and "biblical justice would be a better term." I teach a lot of students whose parents are on Staff at the school, his comments during the staff meeting became common knowledge to the other Freshman. When students asked me about the difference in class, I spent some class time

breaking down those definitions with them so they could critically analyze the situation.

Students defined the terms as "to make right with people, God, and natural creation." In

my personal reflection journal entries, I stated that I felt I had missed the opportunity to

have a class-wide discussion or activity to create examples and place them in the correct

category, Biblical or social justice? In this activity, students expressed that "Nwoye

[Okonkwo's own son] turned from their [Igbo] religion to Christianity." Once I prompted

them to explain further, they stated that Nwoye became "right with God" and turned from

his own family to pursue Christianity. Students tied this into the justice system in the U.S.

claiming "in court, they use a justice system to prove a punishment for the crime."

Students later stated that this process resembles Nwoye's conversion because he was

beaten by Okonkwo for his actions. Their personal connection was their personal beliefs

that "the Bible says when you die, you get judged by God." These responses indicated

their understanding of the term Biblical justice, but they did not craft a response that

generated a discussion on advocacy or concrete ways to accomplish Biblical justice.

Lastly, a group of students that mainly consisted of New students or students with

less exposure to private school defined religious persecution as "a person or group getting

attacked for following another religion different from cultural norms." I praised their

definition in class and used it as an example to discuss how culturally accepted norms do

not always mean the belief is right. In the novel, students mentioned Akuni, a wife of a

tribal lord, who suffered religious persecution. They said, "every time she gave birth to

twins, she was told to throw them away. [Once she] switched to Christianity, the people

around her did not like that." I thought this response was extremely insightful because

students identified religious persecution from both perspectives, the Christians and the

Igbo people. They also presented data, stating that "82% of Muslims [are] discriminated [against] in the U.S." Their personal connection was that Christians in Pakistan were "getting killed [for] being a Christian." Once again, their personal connection did not pertain to their close community, but they defined community as those of Christians around the world.

Experiences

In summary, students may have struggled with understanding how to connect terms such as "social/Biblical justice" and "religious persecution," but they crafted thoughtful responses that indicated their awareness of these issues. The Headmaster's discussion of Biblical versus social justice came about during the middle of my unit, and was not something I had planned on discussing (when I was planning the unit). My students and I were both making sense of this term at the same time. This activity addresses research question 1 because I was able to identify that students were challenged by personally connecting injustice to their lives. Unexpectedly, the class conversation about the differences between social justice and Biblical justice was relevant because of the headmasters' comments. Our discussion was also insightful because I realized that this was a point of personal connection between book-based and real-world social justice issues for my students.

For context purposes, our school is currently in the throes of a parental-Administrative conflict about many issues that have permeated our school culture. Although I had no idea personal conflict about injustice in our school would be prevalent during my instruction, the students and I benefited from reading *Things Fall Apart* with a social justice approach because it felt familiar and relevant to both my students and me.

In my personal reflection journal, I expressed that I would make a point to refine this lesson and spend more time on class discussions because I felt it contributed greatly to their understanding of social justice.

Student *Things Fall Apart* Essays

For their *Things Fall Apart* final essays, I created a prompt that asked students to make a social justice (or injustice) connection to one of the following: religious persecution, gender roles, or racism. In my instructions (Appendix A), I asked that students make a connection related to themes, characterizations, experiences, religion, or culture that avoided the obvious (i.e. Okonkwo suffered in his life.). I asked students how Okonkwo suffered? When and where did he suffer? How does this relate to the world around us? For their conclusion paragraph, they were required to wrap up their points and connect the social (in)justice to themselves personally. I asked: How does the theme you selected relate to the book, the world, and your life? My purpose for this assessment was to require students to critically analyze social (in)justice in the novel while using evidence from the text to support their answer. Deeper still, I asked students to personally tie together what they learned to what was happening in their personal lives.

Commonalities

One of the major commonalities among my students was their interest in gender injustice in the novel. Nine out of thirteen students (69%) personally selected gender roles for this essay. Only 8% of students selected racism, and 23% selected religious persecution. As mentioned in my pedagogy section of the Literature Review, I believed that student choice would yield stronger essays and more personal connections than asking them to focus on all three injustices or limiting it to one.

Surprisingly, 67% of Lifers chose to write about gender discrimination. For instance, Billy used persuasive methods to convince readers of the unrealistic expectations of women in Igbo culture. Billy stated,

> [Women] had reasonable fear, since Okonkwo was very unpredictable in what he might do if they did one thing wrong… Okonkwo constantly talks about his daughter Ezinma saying, "I wish she were a boy" (Achebe 173). Just imagine having a child with someone, and then being disappointed and ashamed of them because they aren't the desired gender.

Billy connected with his audience, provided valid reasoning, and used convincing language that suggested his passion about this type of injustice. Another Lifer, Sammy, mentioned that "[Okonkwo's] wives were also expected to clean and keep his children well. He also got angry when he could not have a boy. Things have changed greatly now women have equal rights and opportunities and are not bound to housework." While Sammy did not add the text-based evidence he was required to add, his details about the story were correct. Sammy also expressed his worldview that things are better for women today. Sammy's response was interesting because he acknowledged that women have more equal rights today, but I think the pandemic has made it quite obvious that women are not treated equally in our society. However, I particularly liked that he mentioned women aren't bound to "housework," because I thought it was an important distinction based on his adamant survey responses that a strong man must be a good leader.

Additionally, the Advanced Exposure students had much to say on the injustice of gender discrimination in the novel. Joseph argued "the social injustice in the Igbo tribe in

regard to gender roles is caused by wives being treated like property, a woman is only worth being if she can bear a child, and wives are treated like slaves by their husbands." Rover spoke at length about Okonkwo's short temper, dislike of his son Nwoye, and the abuse of his wives. He presented the argument that "this is why Okonkwo always wanted a son instead of just a daughter so he can teach him to be a man in the wrong way." This is an important statement because Rover identified how Okonkwo was acting unjustly towards his own son as he indirectly mentioned Okonkwo's toxic version of masculinity.

Similarly, Thrax mentioned the ways in which Okonkwo fears and disrespects women. His modern connection was "women [get abused] fairly often. Around the world in places like the United States and Scotland, they have something called the Pink Tax term. The Pink Tax term is where women's products such as make up and socks [are taxed simply because they are women's products]." I had never discussed the Pink Tax with this class, but I found it interesting that he did research to add to his conclusion about how women were abused (I would have said "exploited") by men.

Differences

One important difference between the essay responses was that while many students focused on injustice, Roberta mentioned a form of justice towards females in the novel. She brilliantly pointed out,

> I think the Igbo clan was very thoughtful that if one were to feel 'sorrow and bitterness,' then they would go to their mother's homeland. Because that is exactly the place where you can feel vulnerable and trusted over. The connections

that a mother has with their child is astronomical. At least we know that the Igbo people had a sense of respect for the mothers out there.

Her response prompted me to write a journal entry to remind myself to modify the essay requirements. In the future, I want to ask students to add a paragraph to their *Things Fall Apart* Essay where they witness justice in the novel. I felt that Roberta presented a holistic perspective of the novel and encapsulated Achebe's purpose in sharing Okonkwo's story. This sheds light on my second research question: How do students respond to an intentional social justice approach to literature in a private (Christian) English I classroom? Unprompted, Roberta felt it was important to mention that there was justice in Okonkwo's society before the British conquerors established a formal system of government. Most students struggled with the injustice in the novel and were quick to judge the Igbo people as evil or "bad." With a social justice approach, I found that many students changed their perspectives of the Igbo people, modeling Achebe's purpose which is to find both harmony and chaos in Nigerian culture.

Another major difference between the Lifers and the New Students was that Lifers chose to focus on the religious persecution of the Christians while the New Students presented an argument from multiple perspectives. For instance, Chester (Lifer) argues one leader,

"[Mr. Brown,] came to be respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on his faith" (Achebe 178). If the missionaries had invaded with force, it could be argued that they were in the wrong but when they gained so much respect you can't blame them for doing as they are allowed.

This entry came from his final draft which was worded more strongly than when I gave him feedback on his rough draft. In my rough draft feedback, I wrote: "I know what you are arguing, but we need to take 'I' out of the essay to take a more confident and objective stance." When we workshopped the essay, I explained that it sounded like he was trying to justify the Christians forcing Christianity on the Igbo people and opening the door for the British government simply because, in his words, "there was nothing illegal about what they were doing." We discussed the difference between illegal and immoral and he seemed to understand how his tone left a negative impression, belittling the injustices done on both sides. While his final draft may have contained carefully crafted syntax, the tone and content did not reflect the conclusion we had mutually reached during our writing conference. On the contrary, Lamar (a new student) considered both sides. He argued,

> [The Christians came] and take away the power and authority from the clan leaders, it destroys the clan's old method of justice and order. This creates a dysfunctional society. This is just the westerners' fault for messing things up and the justice system of their society, throwing things into chaos.

Lamar honed in on the disorder when the Christians and British government are introduced as a form of injustice. He also mentioned that religious persecution cut deeper for the Igbo people because their law and religion were intertwined. Contrary to Chester, it does not seem that Lamar fully condemned the ways of the Igbo tribe but brought attention to their way of being destroyed by the conquerors. In my personal reflections, I wrote that quite a few students differed on their opinions of the Christian missionaries because Achebe does not fully condemn one or the other; instead, he writes chaos into the

plot of Part III to illustrate the powerful and toxic cycle of misunderstanding that leads to injustice for all.

Experiences

Many students indirectly expressed their experiences with a social justice approach in their *Things Fall Apart* essay conclusions. I required students to connect their chosen (in)justice theme to their own lives or the world around them. I chose to leave my written instructions vague so that students felt compelled to search for themselves and their communities rather than me influencing their content. For instance, Billy demonstrated an advocacy mindset towards gender discrimination. Billy mentioned:

> This is exactly Okonkwo's mindset, and he thinks because [his wife] is a woman she won't be strong or able. This is a terrible mindset to have because women can be just as strong as men. If Okonkwo really wanted her to be a boy that bad, he could've just treated her as if she was a boy and taught her how to do masculine things.

Billy identified an issue that is prevalent in our society while connecting it to the need for empathy and a sense of humanity. He mentioned how Okonkwo contradicts his personal beliefs, calling his mindset "terrible." He also presented a solution to the injustice; Okonkwo should have taught his daughter "masculine" things since she was interested, and it could have benefitted both. In my journal, I noted that Billy most likely used the word "masculine" in reference to Okonkwo's beliefs and from the context of question number four on their surveys (stereotyping masculinity).

Regarding racism, many of my students expressed their difficulty with identifying racism in *Things Fall Apart*. I mentioned in my personal reflection journal that Achebe includes racism subtly in the form of linguistic control/dismissal on both sides or the clan shunning/harming those associated with the White man, what modern researchers would most likely call microaggressions (indirect or subtle discrimination). In class, students mentioned a few instances where Igbo people would make fun of the English language or joke about albinos in their tribe. Students also mentioned that the British government wiped out clans of people and forced their ideals on the Igbo tribe as a form of racism. Beatrice also referenced my introductory lesson, stating that Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* to combat racist views of Nigeria at the time. Jax demonstrated his experience with racism in this novel by contextualizing it and providing his own modern perspective, stating:

> Racism: when the white men were looked at completely different, almost as an animal just because of their skin [in Part II of the novel.] More on the modern side, white people discriminate against people of other races. Anyone who looks different commonly gets made fun of for no reason.

Although Jax did not flesh out his argument in great detail, his conclusion demonstrated his experience with racism in the novel. Jax mentions unfairness on both sides, pointing out the Igbo's initial views on White Christian missionaries. He then connected his points to his own worldview and how, from my understanding, racism is more subtle in his community than in Nigeria during the 19th century.

Finally, Lamar reiterated the importance of approaching this novel from multiple perspectives. When students expressed frustration or confusion during reading, I typically

responded that this is a difficult novel full of important themes that Achebe refuses to spoon-feed to the reader. I told them it is sometimes good to be uncomfortable and to read language closely so as to not misunderstand the author. In this way, Lamar focused on religious persecution, stating:

> One of the biggest reasons the tribe members converted to Christianity was the tribe's harmful beliefs before the missionaries arrived. Like casting out twins and banishing them, mutilating baby's so they wouldn't come back, beating their wives and sacrificing/ In conclusion, religious persecution is present in the book. This is caused by their own clan. The arrival of the Christians was almost a blessing you valued. It did a similar thing to how it changed how I viewed things and I got different perspectives on different things. Christianity changed their way of life. In the end, it was a good thing it all happened.

Lamar was a new student and one of the few students of color in my classroom. He also had more experience in public school than the average student on our campus. I found his comments about how this novel changed his own views of religious persecution to be extremely encouraging as a social justice educator. Furthermore, he indirectly expressed his religious views, stating that Christianity should be viewed as a blessing in comparison to the treatment of children in the Igbo tribe. He also acknowledged that he gained a new perspective on these issues. I felt his answer best exemplified the process of learning, growing, and transforming while taking on a social justice approach in an English classroom.

Qualitative Student Interviews

Much of this section will include data from the student qualitative interviews. My interview questions guided students through a model of social justice thinking by first addressing their own backgrounds (age, experiences in a private school, etc.). I then asked students to define social justice in their own words, facilitating a conversation about their exposure to these issues. Students then described issues that were prominent in *Things Fall Apart.* Students applied the social injustices they mentioned to the novel, the world, and finally to their own communities. In my concluding questions, students were asked to share their experiences during this unit as they learned about social justice in an English classroom. My follow up questions prompted students to defend their beliefs about whether a social justice approach should be implemented in an English classroom.

Student-Identified Common Themes

Gender Inequality and Racism are Prevalent in Our Society

One of the most frequently identified themes that I noticed across students' interview data was that gender inequality and racism are prevalent in our society. Billy stated in his *Things Fall Apart* essay,

> I can't personally relate to the discrimination because I'm not a woman, but I can imagine myself in their shoes because I have faced other types of discrimination. Although women had no power and they were abused, the most unfair thing is that women were viewed as weak just because they were women. This discrimination of woman has vastly improved over the past few centuries and decades, but it is not completely gone in our world.

Roberta, one of the two female students in this class, made a modern connection similar to Billy. She argued,

> To me, [gender inequality] is not fair at all. It just seems cruel for a woman or a man to not decide what they want to do for themselves. And even today, it may not be as bad, but there still are some stereotypical claims on what a certain gender must do. We are all just souls living in a body, why does a certain gender have to justify everything?

Roberta and Billy are both Advanced Exposure students and their statements demonstrated to me that they understood gender, or gender constructs, should not determine worth. Both indicated that current gender discrimination is not "as bad" as in the novel or in the past, but stereotypes about women are dangerous. Billy indicated the view that women are the weaker sex was damaging, while Roberta maintained stereotypes about women only performing well in certain roles.

Joseph, another student who had Advanced Exposure to private school, rightly pointed out,

> Igbo men will beat their wives to show dominance, punishment, or just because they're mad and want to take it out on someone. It makes you wonder if the men even view their wives as people because they treat them with no human decency.

I found Joseph's perspective particularly worthy of analysis because he wrote on both his pre-and post-surveys that he "did not care for religion," and because he "is not a Christian, this means that [he] is accepting of other religions." He has not been shy about being an Atheist in previous writing assignments. I felt that his perspective shed light on the environment that he has been raised in, and his firm stance against so much of what

our school stands for and believes in. Contrary to popular opinion, I have found my students to be very accepting of Joseph and refrain from starting arguments with him like they would with my most adamantly vocal Christian student, Chester. I wondered if he refrained from writing about injustice in the form of religious persecution on the *Things Fall Apart* assignment in part because it might be too personal because he had never shied away from expressing his displeasure for Christianity in class before.

In their interviews, 100% of students expressed that racism is an issue in *Things Fall Apart*. During my analysis of interview transcripts, 46% of the class mentioned that racism is still prevalent in society. Of the students that mentioned racism is prevalent, 66.7% of those students specified that racism is prevalent in America. Their perspectives differed on how obvious they felt racism was in their community, but most students identified it as a social injustice that is not far from home. As I was conducting the interview, some of the responses yielded unexpected results. For example, when Chester explained racism, he mentioned: "it is evident in this book racism is obviously a very prominent [injustice]. And we've obviously, we've heard that in America itself. So as an example, would be the social justice movement in early America." I expected him to mention the Black Lives Matter movement or even Martin Luther King Junior's "I Have a Dream" speech that we recently annotated in my Composition I class. However, he is just one example of a Lifer identifying racism as an issue of the past. Sebastian, a student with Advanced Exposure to private school, stated: "There's still racism and you know, like disrespecting either gender, but it's not a lot. Like I don't see any of it." Clearly racism and sexism are different types of injustice, but it was apparent that Sebastian did not make a personal connection to either in his community. In my personal reflection

journal, I mentioned that I had moved too fast through some of my interviews. Because Sebastian seemed a bit uncomfortable during the interview, I didn't press him to explain himself further. Perhaps with further prompting during the interviews, both Chester and Sebastian could have explained their rationale with more depth.

Of my two students of color, only Lamar talked about racism passionately. Lamar is a new student who identifies as Mexican. Rover identifies as Black and he is a very quiet student in general, so it did not surprise me when he chose not to focus on racism in his interview. In contrast, Lamar mentioned that racism was a current issue in America. His experience with the novel is that "[he] didn't want to keep reading, but he had to… it was horrible." Lamar's opinion about racism in the novel and his vocal aversion to it sheds light on the importance of teaching with a social justice approach. His strong response indicated to me that students can be impacted by literature that fosters empathy. Additionally, I learned through Lamar's responses that students can make deep connections to the text by applying social (in)justice to the world around them. I wrote in my reflection that Lamar taught me the importance of this work, but also the importance of careful planning because it personally affected my students.

Later in the interview, Lamar was passionate about not passing judgment based on skin color. When I asked him about his takeaway from a social justice approach, he adamantly expressed "don't judge your culture immediately and like learn more things about that person, don't judge them by what they look like, or how they act." It's noteworthy that Lamar was one of the few newcomers to our private school, and one of only a few students who expressed a belief in the modern-day prevalence of racism and gender inequities. Lamar is one of my most diverse students with the best responses

throughout this whole process. Lamar had voiced his experiences plainly throughout this unit and the whole semester that he: 1) Loves my class, 2) enjoys private school, and 3) misses public school because the kids "debate about politics less." (Direct quotes from daily conversations). I believe he was referring to students like Chester who tend to vocalize political views in class, bringing them into discussions frequently. During the unit, Lamar claimed that the British government started imposing rules on people who "already had rules." This statement is significant because it demonstrated to me that Lamar grasped the injustice of racism and disrespecting other cultures and he could communicate this to his classmates with relevant evidence.

Students such as Lamar, Joseph, and Sebastian demonstrated that they understood the injustice of racism and gender discrimination in the novel. Both of my female students also mentioned racism, but quickly followed up with the argument that gender discrimination is obvious. Surprisingly, half of my Lifers identified racism in other countries or racism of the past, distancing it from their communities, especially their school community. This data suggests that private Christian students can identify that racism and gender discrimination are prevalent in their society. However, due to many factors, ninth grade students in this context may not notice, or choose not to advocate against, social injustices such as racism or gender discrimination in their immediate communities. It is significant that Lifers have worked with the same group of students/peers for the entirety of their education, so they aren't familiar with experiences, identities, and challenges that may exist outside of this specific private Christian school space.

Religious Persecution is Less Prevalent: It's Mainly a "Foreign Affair"

Of the Lifers and Advanced students, the majority identified religious persecution as an injustice. Some did not call the persecution of the Igbo people through the control of religion "religious persecution," but they described it with examples from the story. All but Chester took a neutral stance on the religious conflict in my College Preparatory English I class, slightly siding with the Igbo people due to the blatant acts of violence as a direct result of the missionaries leading the way for the British to conquer Nigeria. In Chester's interview, he clearly sympathized with the Christian missionaries, stating:

> The government is more of a background thing [that takes] advantage of the missionaries to colonize the country of Nigeria, so I wouldn't even say the missionaries were doing anything wrong, rather, they were being taken advantage of.

Without an in-depth analysis of the politics and history of the 1890's, it is understandable that Chester would consider the Christian missionaries "taken advantage of" by the British government. Other students mentioned the religious persecution the Igbo Christian converts suffered from their own families and society. Chester's perspective was unique for a ninth grader to articulate because it was not as obvious in the story, and it was largely based on contextual inference.

Of the thirteen students in this class and study, eleven identified religious persecution as a form of societal injustice. Two students mentioned there was religious persecution in America for those of "different religions" without specifying the religion. Students like Beatrice and Roberta seemed nervous during their interviews, so I did not press them to explain which religions they were referring to. Perhaps with further prompting during the interviews, both Roberta and Beatrice could have explained their

rationale with more depth. Two other students claimed that Muslims were persecuting Christians around the world as their personal connection. In my analysis, the most unique comments were from Jason (Advanced) and Billy (Lifer) who indirectly mentioned a form of religious persecution at our school, which differed from their classmates' responses. Jason mentioned the following unprompted: "We're in high school now, it's going to be more mature books. We have Chapel and all that, but you kind of chose to go to school for that- but it's not forcing this religion, it's very open." In response, I asked a follow-up question about what it would be like to be a student of a different religion at our school. Jason continued, "it wouldn't be much different. For an Atheist, maybe you could get through without any problems. [If you feel strongly against all religions,] you might want to fight against it." This conversation provided an opportunity for Jason to demonstrate thoughtfulness about students who may be othered (alienated) at our school simply because they are in the religious minority. Additionally, this was a crucial answer to my key questions about how students are connecting what they have read to themselves and their community.

Additionally, I asked Billy what injustices he sees in his community and his response was similar to Jason's. He claimed:

There's not, this is a pretty nice area and school. So there's not too many issues that go along here with like, discrimination and stuff, right? But I guess maybe, with all being forced to take a Bible class if someone is an Atheist, they don't want to learn about Him. Like they just don't want to, and what they have to take it on? [If I was an Atheist?] I don't know, it probably would just make me feel

weird. Like someone forced it on me, right? Because you don't have a choice

whether or not to take the Bible class, and you have to get the credit.

Although neither student claimed that as a form of religious persecution, I noticed the

commonalities between responses. It's common knowledge to the participants in this

study that multiple ninth graders are vocal about being Atheists this year, which is

strikingly different from my last two years at this school. Students seem to be more

mindful of other religions this year than ever before. There are multiple factors that could

contribute to Jason and Billy's responses. Perhaps my New students did not mention

religious persecution at our school because this is their first year and they have not been

exposed to this environment over a period of time. The Lifers were adamant about not

seeing any injustice in their own communities. This could also be possible because Lifers

wanted to protect or defend their school. Students are so ingrained in the school; they

might not want to admit that there's anything negative happening there.

There are many students who have parents who teach at their school, which adds

layers to their relationship with our school. Most of my students distanced religious

persecution from their school and their communities, often mentioning Christians being

currently persecuted in other countries without much detail. However, students such as

Jason and Billy provided an element of thoughtfulness and connection, demonstrating

that religious persecution may be closer to home than expected, and not a foreign affair.

It is Important to Learn About Different Cultures and Religions

In their qualitative interviews, I asked students the question: How might our unit

on *Things Fall Apart* influence how you move forward? I discovered that the question

was too broad for my students to answer, so I morphed the two follow up questions to

essentially ask them about their takeaways from the novel first and how they could apply that to their lives or other books that we read. Although they did not directly mention that it's important to learn about different cultures, their responses were deeply thought provoking. Of all the students interviewed, 92% answered the last question with a variation of "it made me aware of other issues," "I learned to be more aware of other cultures and religions," and "by seeing the other side of things" (Appendix C). These responses indicated to me that many students demonstrated a willingness to learn about different cultures (including religions) and they may approach these topics with a more open-minded approach in the future.

Sebastian took a lot of prompting to answer my last interview question, but I appreciated his honesty that this unit "doesn't change [his] worldview or anything like that." He struggled to fully articulate the complicated way that Achebe does not fully condemn either the Igbo tribe or the Christian missionaries for their religious conflict. However, he succinctly stated that Achebe didn't "say [one religion] was wrong; it's just obviously not okay." Additionally, some students articulated the importance of learning about different cultures in a better way in their *Things Fall Apart* essay. For instance, Beatrice concluded her essay with the most obvious mindset for advocacy in the class. She states,

> Unfortunately, people are mistreated to this day. We need to find a way to help these people and not [exclude] them from things that are important. We also need to learn about different cultures and help them turn to the right ways in love, and that's through Jesus Christ.

Beatrice became nervous during the interview because she felt that she would say the wrong thing. However, she clearly articulated her belief that learning how to not exclude others starts with learning about their culture. She expressed what a non-Christian may consider a "missionary mindset," but she distinguishes her views from the missionaries in *Things Fall Apart*. Like Mr. Kiaga, who was respected by the tribe, Beatrice expressed an openness to learn from others.

Student Experiences with a Social Justice Approach

Students Define Social Justice by Category

Across the interview data, students indicated one of two definitions of social justice: (1) to make something right in a society or (2) to seek justice in a community. Students were adamant that to" make something right" means identifying an injustice and involving the law to correct it. To seek justice in a community recalls Kraynak's (2018) interpretation of social justice regarding advocating for justice within your own community rather than on a larger or systemic scale.

By analyzing the data by type of students (Lifers, Advanced, or New), I determined that the Lifers focused on justice as law or an agreement to punish wrongdoing. Billy, Sammy, and Chester all posed a different scenario where a criminal is declared guilty by their society. Billy's response stood out to me because he was one of the few who mentioned equality for "all religions and cultures; people's beliefs." During Billy's interview he articulated very important points that connected social injustice in the novel to injustice in the world; mainly focusing on gender inequality. Similarly, the New students defined social justice as justice for all or justice to punish wrong doing. The main distinction was that the new students used words such as "fix," "get what they

deserve," or "socially [just]." This suggested to me that the New students had the context of the novel at the forefront of their mind as they participated in their interviews while the Lifers took a broader approach in their definitions of social justice.

Furthermore, students with Advanced exposure to private Christian school overwhelmingly defined social justice as a societal decision to make things right. They used action-oriented words such as "standing up," "making things right," and the "distribution of justice." When prompted, these students provided more ways to make things right than the other two groups of students. It is worth mentioning that Jason stated social justice is "good to have in a community; but it's not needed in school." Later in his interview, he expressed that school should not be a place for "political division [but] for learning." This statement suggested that his view is that advocating for social justice should not model modern political movements. When I asked him if social justice belonged in an English classroom, he adamantly expressed that it should. He also pointed out that he felt our school was "open" stating: "We have Chapel and all that, but you kind of chose to go to school for that, but not forcing this religion, it's very open [unlike the White men in the book]". His definition of social justice may differ from that of his peers largely because he was absent for much of this unit.

Social Justice Approaches Belong in English Classrooms

In the qualitative interviews, 100% of students claimed that a social justice approach belongs in an English classroom. As a teacher-researcher, I am mindful of my position and how my power in the classroom may influence their responses. I followed up with students after they claimed a social justice approach belongs in an English classroom setting for educational purposes. Although the responses ranged from "it's

good to talk about" (Jax), to "we need to learn about something real" (Lamar), 92% of students articulated the necessity of learning about social justice through narrative specifically. When I asked some students what other classes should talk about social justice, 38% stated it would be helpful in a history class, but English is better because "you learn about people's stories" (Jason). Lamar's response to this book surprised me because he complained frequently about Okonkwo. I asked him if he was surprised to read about these themes in an English class and he responded, "yeah, most definitely I was [surprised to read,] I was not expecting something as realistic or as awful as this. It's not a bad book, it's just what happens in it." Although he seemed to prefer a clear demarcation between politics and education, Lamar did claim that the book "makes [him] start noticing stuff like all the different cultural differences." Across all the interview data, students evinced a shared belief that attention to social justice was not only appropriate in the English classroom, but necessary.

All but one Lifer and one New student expressed that they were not surprised to learn about social justice in an English class because they "expected high school to be [using] more mature books." However, most students who have been in our school for six plus years indicated that they were surprised, and they had "never read anything like [this book.]" This data suggests that students felt social justice was important, voicing that they "need to learn something real [in school]." New students and Lifers alike recognized their lack of exposure to social justice. The similar opinions of the Lifers group demonstrated student experiences; attending the same private Christian school, which lacked a social justice focus within their English classes. Students defended in their

interviews that the purpose of school is to learn, therefore ELA lends itself to a social

justice approach through narration and storytelling.

Social Justice is an Uncomfortable Topic, but it is has Value

Students described issues that were prominent in *Things Fall Apart.* Students

applied the social injustices they mentioned to the novel, then the world, and finally to

their own communities. Many students expressed surprise about my social justice

approach during instruction of *Things Fall Apart.* However, their interview responses

reflected an appreciation for talking about relevant issues and an awareness for injustice

in the world. Some students even expressed the uncomfortable experience of learning

about the injustices in the novel. Lamar stated he "wanted to stop reading the book, like

put it down, because it was rough."

In response to my last question, (how might our unit on *Things Fall Apart*

influence how you move forward?) most of the class expressed that they would take what

they learned and apply it to other texts or their world. Chester and Sammy unsurprisingly

said that it "didn't change my worldview or anything," but it was "useful" and "made me

aware of social justice." Chester and Sammy's responses in the qualitative interview

paralleled their preferences for American cultural values in the pre-survey. In both the

post-survey and interviews, however, they both demonstrated that they would take what

they have learned in this unit and apply it to their understanding of social justice in the

future. Billy mentioned that he learned "to not feel weird when [he] reads [books like

Things Fall Apart]*.*" When I followed up with him, he explained how he "learned to try

to relate to cultures different than [his] own." Billy's language expressed how this book

initially made him uncomfortable and his takeaway demonstrated the value of learning about social justice in English classrooms.

Furthermore, Farris mentioned, "I know about these complications deeper now; I can dive deeper and pay more attention [to] people's stories." When I asked Joseph about his takeaway, he stated "this book made me annoyed [because they didn't] respect other people's religion." Thrax honestly expressed that the book felt like a "waste of time" because Okonkwo died in the end. Lamar said this unit taught him to "[notice] complications in the world." These responses demonstrated to me that students related to Okonkwo's story, they felt strong indignation towards the types of injustice in the novel, and they articulated how they have grown or how they will use what they have learned to look at things differently in the future. In only three weeks, students demonstrated thoughtfulness throughout the data collection process. Students contextualized injustice in the novel, *Things Fall Apart,* while identifying how systems of power such as the British government and in some cases, the missionaries, could harm communities, peoples, and cultures. Students also identified key social justice themes such as religious persecution, racism, and gender roles. In the next section, I will analyze my findings as they relate to my two research questions and consider the implications of this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this section, I consider my findings in light of my research questions. I then draw on my findings and the preceding literature review to offer implications for English teachers.

Addressing Research Question 1

In my first research question, I asked: What are the challenges and limitations for educators teaching literature from a social justice lens specifically within a private Christian school? Both my own experience and my review of literature indicate that it's challenging to plan and implement a social justice approach in private Christian English classrooms. However, the student data from my findings suggest that it is worth every effort.

In reflection, I stated that using *Things Fall Apart* as an anchor text for this unit was both relevant and appropriate, eliciting passionate responses from my students. Additionally, the assignments that I created were effective and students demonstrated growth in their understanding of social (in)justice. The post-survey revealed that 81% of students shifted their language from neutral answers to stronger responses and rationales. This demonstrated to me that students discovered a passion for learning about new cultures and religions after this unit, especially compared to their pre-survey responses. Students responded strongly during class discussions and in their final essays. The qualitative interviews demonstrated students were listening in class as they engaged with the text. Students voiced that they understood what was being taught and that they saw the merit for learning about social justice in an English classroom. I reflected that I

would like to modify all of my units so I can use a social justice approach all semester long with an advocacy project as my final assessment for English I.

Largely, the struggles and limitations that I documented were a result of my inexperience with teaching using a social justice approach. One major challenge for me was the phrasing of the *Things Fall Apart* journal prompts (Appendix D) that I created for students to complete as warmups. On some days, it did not appear that students were fully grasping my questions or remotely interested in answering my questions. This situation brought to my attention an interesting dilemma: How can educators engage students in difficult questions with social justice themes as they read? Boyd and Coffey (2021) and Dover (2016) demonstrate that public educators are effectively using anchor texts and applying modern issues to engage students, often using a project-based learning approach. As a private Christian educator, I see no reason to not implement the same strategies other than possibly being required to add a Biblical aspect to the project requirements. Moving forward, I will most likely modify my reading journal prompts to present modern scenarios before moving on to a small group application of the scenario to the novel.

Addressing Research Question 2

I largely focused my data and findings on my second research question: How do students respond to an intentional social justice approach to literature in a private (Christian) English I classroom? The student data suggested that students felt a social justice approach was valuable in an English class as they have become more aware of injustice, discovered a passion for "standing up for others," and attributed value to a social justice approach in an English classroom.

Students responded to social justice themes more passionately on their post-survey rationales. The majority of the class had selected "Agree" or "Disagree" when I asked them if they liked learning about different cultures and religions. In the post-survey rationale, students changed their responses to "Strongly Agree" (or from "Disagree" to "Agree"). Roberta and Beatrice expressed they "loved learning about other cultures" and they felt it was "respectful to learn about different religions." Sammy and Chester, both Lifers, maintained their preference for American culture in the post-survey while shifting their language to more open-minded responses, saying "it is good to know [about different cultures,]" and "learning [about others] is always a good thing," which suggests growth. Students also specified the need for social justice with action-affirmative language in their post-survey rationales. Beatrice originally mentioned that helping others is good [because] the Bible tells us to serve others" in the pre-survey. In the post-survey, Beatrice stated helping others is "necessary [because she] wants others to feel safe." Her language and focus shifted over the unit, reflecting growth in empathy and purpose; to make others safe, not only because the Bible tells her so, but because she felt it was necessary.

Furthermore, students documented their experiences with this unit by selecting their own theme for (in)justice in their *Things Fall Apart* essays. Students were required to select a theme from the novel to highlight (in)justice while using text-based evidence and personal experiences to demonstrate their understanding. I was blown away by their in-depth analysis and personal connections to this story. Billy, a student with Advanced Exposure to private school, stated he is "not a woman, but [he can imagine himself in their shoes because he has] faced other types of discrimination." Billy's analysis stood

out to me because he was clear about his indignation for gender discrimination while acknowledging how his experiences are different. Billy was one of the many students who exemplified empathy, understanding, and growth throughout the unit.

Although Lamar was a New student, his essay on religious persecution demonstrated similar indignation. Lamar stated,

> [The Christians] come and take away the power and authority from the clan leaders, it destroys the clan's old method of justice and order. This creates a dysfunctional society. This is just the westerners' fault for messing things up and the justice system of their society, throwing things into chaos… it changed how I viewed things and I got different perspectives on different things [throughout *Things Fall Apart.*]

Lamar's experience provides a unique perspective for this research because he is new to our school, and he has more experience in public school than his classmates. He expressed a salient point that the Igbo people were thrown into chaos because of the breakdown of their justice system by the British. In comparison to Lifers like Chester, Lamar demonstrated that he is more willing to learn about other cultures as he identified issues in the novel pertaining to the actions of the Christian missionaries. Chester's tone and language in his essay suggested that he believed the missionaries "did not technically do anything wrong according to the law." In stark contrast, Lamar expressed that the justice system failed them, and this taught him to have a different perspective on this type of injustice.

Lastly, the qualitative interviews addressed my second research questions because students demonstrated an understanding that my social justice approach was both

intentional and valuable in an English class in a private Christian school. When I asked students if they were surprised to see a social justice approach in an English class, all but one Lifer and one Advanced Exposure student said yes. Roberta mentioned "yeah, I've never read anything like this… since I've always been at this school, [books are told from] a point of view of someone who believes in God. The Christians aren't the good guys [in *Things Fall Apart]*." Two other students with Advanced Exposure mentioned that they have not been exposed to this genre of literature or English teachers who teach about social (in)justice.

It was also significant that 100% of students responded passionately that a social justice approach belonged in an English classroom. I am aware of my influence as their teacher, so I asked students some follow up questions to clarify. Jax (Advanced Exposure) stated, "I feel prepared in a good way [by seeing] the other side of people and [how] people aren't willing to change [for the better.]" Similarly, Jason (AE) claimed he felt "prepared to fight against problems that [he sees.]" Farris, a New student, claimed he "can dive deeper and pay more attention to people's stories." One Lifer (Billy) touched on being more aware and more comfortable with "how to read discrimination and these hard topics without feeling weird when you read about them." While each student touched on a different aspect of learning about social (in)justice, their interview data suggested that students took this topic seriously. Significantly, students attributed value to their experiences learning about social justice in a private Christian school English classroom.

Limitations

Largely, the struggles and limitations that I documented was a result of my inexperience with teaching using a social justice approach. I learned that students would need explicit and carefully worded journal prompts, a strong anchor text, and connections to modern issues. One major challenge for me was the phrasing of the *Things Fall Apart* journal prompts (Appendix D) that I created for students to complete as warmups. On some days, it did not appear that students were fully grasping my questions or remotely interested in answering my questions. This situation brought to my attention an interesting dilemma; How can educators engage students in difficult questions with social justice themes as they read? Boyd & Coffey (2021) and Dover (2016) demonstrate that public educators are effectively using anchor texts and applying modern issues to engage students, often using a project-based learning approach. As a private Christian educator, I see no reason to not implement the same strategies other than possibly being required to add a Biblical aspect to the project requirements. Moving forward, I will most likely modify my reading journal prompts to present modern scenarios before moving on to a small group application of the scenario to the novel.

As a private Christian educator, I felt there are many limitations to using a social justice approach. For instance, the number of participants in my study could be considered small. My class was only composed of thirteen students. While these students represented a more racially, culturally, and academically diverse background than our average student population, I only selected one of my classes to analyze. This is partly due to another limitation, the amount of time that I had to collect and analyze data. I started this unit in the second week of the semester, and I was only able to allot three

weeks of instruction due to the demands of my graduate coursework and our school schedule. I believe that if I had the entire semester to devote to social justice approaches, the results would suggest drastic improvement of my instruction and student growth over time. Further research and time is needed throughout the semester to fully demonstrate student growth. My second research question about student experiences demonstrated growth on a small scale. A full semester's worth of data would demonstrate student understandings of how to raise awareness for social injustices and how to apply knowledge to advocate for change within their communities.

One of the major limitations for me was my school climate. I felt particularly limited when my Headmaster told the teaching staff that social justice is not a term we as Christian educators should use, suggesting that we should talk about Biblical justice with our students. I felt this comment was somewhat directed towards me because I had previously obtained his permission (in addition to my principal) prior to conducting this study, therefore he was well aware of my focus. Additionally, our school is in the midst of a parental uproar about administrative leadership and the possible implementation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in our school. In this study, I am not using CRT for many reasons, but I did have a parent who misunderstood an assignment last semester and became fearful that I was using this theory in my class. These experiences helped answer my first research question about the challenges of teaching social justice in a private Christian setting, but the circumstances limited me in ways that I had not anticipated.

Another limitation is that I am required to use ACSI's Biblical standards (Appendix E). For this unit, I felt it was important to discuss faulty religious practices with my students, many of whom identify as Christians. I spent significant time focusing

on my own language use when creating writing prompts and during class discussions.

Achebe does a remarkable job demonstrating the dangers of disrespecting other religions

and cultures. I felt that if I only implemented Biblical standards in the instruction of

Things Fall Apart, it would limit students' understanding of the novel. Therefore, I chose

a thematic focus based on Common Core standards which is something I am familiar

with and well trained in from my experiences in public school. Kraynak (2018) maintains

that social justice originated as a Catholic concept coined by Rosimini. This demonstrates

to me that there is a place in Christian classroom to teach social justice from both a

Biblical and a social perspective. With this in mind, I blended a thematic approach (using

NC Common Core standards) with Biblical standards (ACSI).

Implications

Despite the limitations stated above, I felt that I had freedom within my

classroom, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to teach for social justice in an

environment that is unfamiliar with the approach. For educators seeking to teach social

justice, it can be challenging to select an effective novel. Teachers might look for features

such as diverse characters and perspectives, clear injustices, corrupt systems of power,

narrative style, and dynamic settings when trying to determine if a novel will foster the

type of social justice engagement. *Things Fall Apart* worked well for my English classes

in a private Christian school setting. I believe this novel connects to students who believe

in God and advocate for missions just as much as it appeals to those who don't follow an

organized religion.

In the novel, there are many types of discrimination, which has a wide range of

relatability for all types of students. This book also challenges critical thinking and

tackles social injustice in a brilliant narrative style. *Things Fall Apart* is organized into three parts; cultural background that introduces the characters and important aspects of Igbo culture, Okonkwo's personal exile to his motherland, and the British conquest leading to the destruction of the Igbo people and Okonkwo's suicide. Achebe accomplishes this narrative by designing each chapter in Part I to reflect a different season for the Igbo people told in a series of short stories, the dry season, weddings, funerals, the Week of Peace, and the harvest season. In Part II, Achebe centers his narrative on Okonkwo's shame and embarrassment during exile while he seeks comfort in his motherland where the cultural practices are different from his homeland, Umuofia. Achebe narrates Part III in a more objective manner, highlighting the rise of Christianity which parallels the destruction of Igbo culture and the establishment of Western values and a government.

Novels such as *Things Fall Apart* would be immensely effective for a social justice unit in a private Christian school because of the religious and missionary connection. In other contexts, *Things Fall Apart* would be an excellent novel to focus on even if religion is not the main focus. Based on this study, I would recommend that teachers select any novel where their students can connect to the characters or setting. I found it particularly powerful to introduce a novel with a main character, Okonkwo, who represents the opposite of the values that our students and school community uphold. I believe it would be just as powerful for teachers in other school settings to select a novel with characters who represent their students' values.

Furthermore, student experiences with a social justice approach using *Things Fall Apart* were overwhelmingly positive in their qualitative interviews for this study.

Students viewed a social justice focus as "relevant" or "realistic," further confirming that social justice education belongs in English classrooms. Based on the findings of this study, it is statistically significant that my students demonstrated their passion for learning about new cultures on their post-survey rationales as well. A social justice approach could be used by English teachers who seek methods for student engagement and fostering real-world connections to literature. Teachers in private and public schools alike could benefit from deep conversations about (in)justice through narrative storytelling. Our class conversations ended with real world applications. Social justice conversations allowed my students to express their passions and interests. Additionally, the nature of this study fostered conversations that invited students to reflect on their personal beliefs and share them with others. All these conversations were facilitated through the use of a text that could be categorized as narrative storytelling, in the case of this research, *Things Fall Apart*. It is my hope that private Christian school teachers benefit from this study and feel more confident about teaching for social justice, according to Biblical standards and with academic rigor.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Upon completion of this research study with ninth-grade students in a private Christian English Language Arts classroom, I have a renewed passion and in-depth understanding about teaching for social justice. Reading through their interview transcripts, written response assignments, and surveys has demonstrated to me that students have been made aware of (in)justices in literature and around the world. More importantly, students are beginning to make connections to injustices such as religious persecution, gender roles, and racism in their communities.

As I began analyzing my data, I was surprised by my students' depth and passion for themes that were revealed during our social justice approach with *Things Fall Apart*. I certainly have a deeper understanding of my students and their worldviews after conducting this study. While this unit was incredibly challenging to create, teach, and analyze, the work was incredibly important to both me and my students. This study allowed me to experiment with a carefully crafted social justice approach in a private Christian school setting. Reflecting upon my own practices and the challenges of teaching social justice, I appreciate the time and effort it takes to teach for social justice and how this approach fosters critical discussion both inside and outside the classroom.

As English educators, we often feel pressured to teach to standards that require us to apply literature to the real world. This can be incredibly challenging as we balance the pressures of meeting state standards and the desire to engage our students in reading and critical thinking. In a private Christian school, teachers are required to apply every subject to Biblical principles as there are no state standards that we are required to apply. In my experience, it is challenging to select appropriate, relevant, and meaningful

literature that exemplifies a diverse worldview. By taking the time to introduce a social justice approach to a unit that I've taught many times, I determined that our class discussions, the quality of their work, and our qualitative interviews yielded results that were unprecedented. I was able to use my findings to create a student-centered thematic unit about social (in)justice in *Things Fall Apart* that fostered critical discussions that scaffolded students beyond what is academically expected of them at our school. Students demonstrated their knowledge of social (in)justice and their desire for change throughout the unit. This research has completely shifted my teaching paradigm and focus in tremendous ways. I hope that future educators, in private or public schools, use my failures and successes as a guide for teaching for social justice in English Language Arts classrooms.

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APPENDIX A: ESSAY PROMPT

<u>Things Fall Apart Essay</u>

*<u>Directions</u>***:**

After reading *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, **make a social justice (or injustice) connection to one of the following:** *Religious persecution, gender roles, or racism.*

- Connection should be related to theme, motivations or experiences, characterizations, religion, culture, etc. **Please avoid the obvious:** e.g., Okonkwo suffered in his life…
  - o Better questions: How did he suffer? When and where did he suffer? How does that relate to the world around us?
- You are required to **select three quotes from the text** to prove your claim. Make sure it is cited in the correct MLA format!
- **Your conclusion paragraph** should Wrap up all your points and connect it to you <u>personally</u>. How does the theme you selected relate to the book, the world, and your life? (3-5 sentences).

<u>Essay Organization:</u>

- This will be a **five-paragraph essay** and your **three** citations must be in MLA Format.
- Cite evidence from *Things Fall Apart.*
- *Introduction:* Your thesis statement must be the last sentence of your Introduction.
- *Body Paragraphs 1-3:* Topic sentence (1 sentence,) evidence/quote (1 sentence,) explanation/analysis (3-4 sentences).
- *Conclusion:* Wrap up all your points and connect it to you <u>personally</u>. How does the theme you selected relate to the book, the world, and your life? (3-5 sentences).

APPENDIX B: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Wilson's Interview Protocol
This is a semi-structured interview protocol, so all questions presented in this interview protocol (including the wording, content, and organization of questions) are subject to change based on the participants' personal experiences and responses to earlier questions.

Researcher's Opening: Thank you for your participation in this study so far! The purpose of this work is to try to gain a better understanding of how students in a private Christian school respond to a social justice approach to *Things Fall Apart.* In class, we've talked about societal issues in Nigeria and how that applies to issues we see in our society.

Today is _____ and I'm talking with a student in my _____ class.
If you are comfortable, please provide the following information about yourself:
- Age?
- How many years have you been at our school?
- Have you ever attended a public school?

Researcher's Questions:
What is your definition of social justice?
- Follow-up questions could include:
    - What does it include/not include?
    - What might social justice "look like"?

What social justice issues are prevalent in *Things Fall Apart*?
- Follow-up questions could include:
    - Were you surprised to read about these issues in an English class?
    - How did you feel as you read about these issues?

What connections do you see between issues in *Things Fall Apart* and issues in your community or the world?
- Follow-up questions could include:
    - How did you feel about discussing these issues in English class?
    - Do you think we should talk about these issues in English class? Why/why not?

How might our unit on *Things Fall Apart* influence how you move forward?
- Follow-up questions could include:
    - How might this unit influence how you read texts in the future (in this class or others)?
        - How might this unit influence how you look at current social issues?

Researcher's Closing: Thank you for participating in today's interview. If, at any point, you have questions about today's session or more information you would like to provide, please feel free to contact me by email or phone.

APPENDIX C: STUDENT INTERVIEW RESPONSES

Pseudonym	Type of Student	Takeaways
Billy	**Lifer**	How to read discrimination and these hard topics without feeling like, uncomfortable about it? Or being Yeah, just comfortable with being able to like to read these. And not feeling weird when you read them
Sammy		People are more aware of the actual book- like a person's story. This brings it out to real life [me: what does it bring out?] like social justice.
Chester		I already have done this research, it's something that I am already interested in. So, I will continue to apply it to my other research. Now I know more about the colonization of Nigeria. [So, if] someone asks me, I know about it so I can use it as an example.
Joseph	**Advanced**	[This book] made me annoyed. [me: Really, why?] Not respecting other people's religion. [me: So, what would be your takeaway] To respect.
Beatrice		[It will teach me] don't judge others by what they look like
Rover		It will make me more aware of problems [other people have]
Sebastian		It hasn't changed my worldview or anything like that; it's good to talk about in an English class [me: why?] Because they didn't condemn beating women as wrong, I don't think that it was like, condoning it, there was just, you know, it didn't say its opinion on it. Like, you know, the book doesn't say this was wrong. It just, it's just obviously, not okay.
Roberta		The Christians weren't the good guys in the story. I've never read anything like this before [it's usually about perspectives of people who believe in God]. I know the meaning of bad things happening because of following the wrong religion. It makes me more aware of these issues.
Jax		I feel prepared in a good way [by seeing] the other side of people and [how] people aren't willing to change [for the better]
Jason		I feel prepared [me: for what?] prepared to fight against problems that I see

Lamar	New	I have a different perspective, like I start noticing all the complications [me: in the world?] Yes ma'am.
Thrax		The ending felt like a waste of time [me: because Okonkwo died?] Yes. [me: so...] So, I guess expect bad things?
Farris		I know about these complications deeper now; I can dive deeper and pay more attention [me: to what? To the details of the story?] Yeah, but like to people's stories

APPENDIX D: JOURNAL PROMPTS

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe*:* <u>Reflection Journals</u>

Method: Students will have 10 uninterrupted minutes to respond to these journal prompts. I will open a class discussion for those who are comfortable with sharing. I will collect every Wednesday to analyze responses.

Chapter 1 Prompt	Okonkwo was very concerned that his father was a failure, so he became very successful at a young age. Achebe says, "age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings" (8). • Does your culture respect elders? • Write about a time that you felt that your age is what held you back from achieving something.
Chapter 3 Prompt	"Some farmers had not planted their yams yet. They were the lazy easy-going ones… This year they were the wise ones" (Achebe 23). • Write about a time that you felt your good deeds did not pay off OR that you procrastinated, and it was worth it. • Why is it so important to the Igbo people to work hard?
Chapter 4 Prompt	"But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess" (Achebe 30). • Recall the term "hubris." What did it mean in *the Odyssey*, and how does Okonkwo display hubris in the quote above? • What is the difference between Okonkwo's gods/goddesses and Odysseus'? What is the difference between them and your religion?
Chapter 7-9 Prompt	"But it was as silly as all women's stories" (Achebe 75). This quote says a lot about Okonkwo's views on women and their roles in society. • What is he saying about women? Does this accurately reflect Igbo views? • How does this align with your views on women and their roles in society?
"Halfway" Prompt (Ch. 1-11)	Pick two of the following themes in *Things Fall Apart* to write about. How are the themes presented in the story? What does the author want us to know/think about them? • Morals • Honor • Sacrifice

	- Atonement (forgiveness of sins) - Civilization - Spirituality - Works vs. Faith
Chapter 15 Prompt	"'There is no story that is not true," said Uchendu" (Achebe 141). In this conversation, Okonkwo learns that Abame was destroyed because of White conquerors. Do you agree or disagree with the quote above and *why?*
Ending Prompt	- What decision did Okonkwo make at the end of the novel? - Why did he make this decision? - How can there be justice (things made right) after this event?

APPENDIX E: ACSI BIBLICAL STANDARDS

All indicators in **boldface** are considered critical.

7.1 Schoolwide expected student outcomes include character development, acquisition of Christian values, and spiritual formation. (C)

7.2 Christlike respect, compassion, and caring for self and all others is taught and demonstrated by school personnel. (C)

7.3 Mentoring and discipleship experiences focus on spiritual formation, character development, and the instilling of Christian values. The school provides a structure whereby each student is known personally by at least one adult who can provide support for that student's spiritual formation. (E/S)

7.3a Teachers model mentoring and discipleship with each other to demonstrate Christlike attitudes and actions that directly and indirectly influence spiritual growth, character development, and Christian values in the children. (EE)

7.4 Board, administration, faculty, staff, and student interactions reflect the attitude of Christ. Communication among them demonstrates sensitivity and responsiveness to the individual needs, interests, and temperaments of the students. (C)

7.5 All aspects of the school and its instructional program reflect developmentally appropriate application of a biblical worldview and Christlike character and values. (C)

7.6 Age-appropriate opportunities for service and missions, including compassionate outreach to the poor, needy, or vulnerable, are provided as a means of spiritual growth and formation. (C)

APPENDIX F: STUDENT SURVEYS

***Things Fall Apart* Student Survey**

<u>**Directions:**</u> For each of the following statements, please *select* whether you strongly agree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. After, please briefly *explain why* in the space provided.

The Statement	Your Response
If people are suffering, it is my job to stand up for them. **Explain:**	o Strongly Disagree o Disagree o Agree o Strongly Agree
One small group should be able to make decisions for the whole population. **Explain:**	o Strongly Disagree o Disagree o Agree o Strongly Agree
It is important to learn about different religions. **Explain:**	o Strongly Disagree o Disagree o Agree o Strongly Agree
To be considered masculine, one must be strong and a good leader. **Explain:**	o Strongly Disagree o Disagree o Agree o Strongly Agree
To be considered feminine, one must be good at caretaking and submitting to authority.	o Strongly Disagree

Explain:	○ Disagree ○ Agree ○ Strongly Agree
If someone has a different religion than me, I should try to change their mind. **Explain:**	○ Strongly Disagree ○ Disagree ○ Agree ○ Strongly Agree
I am accepting of other religions. **Explain:**	○ Strongly Disagree ○ Disagree ○ Agree ○ Strongly Agree
If I was told that my religion was wrong, it would make me feel hopeless. **Explain:**	○ Strongly Disagree ○ Disagree ○ Agree ○ Strongly Agree
I am interested in other cultures. **Explain:**	○ Strongly Disagree ○ Disagree ○ Agree ○ Strongly Agree
Different families have different values, and that's okay. **Explain:**	○ Strongly Disagree ○ Disagree ○ Agree ○ Strongly Agree

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