



Teacher Perspectives on Social Justice Practices in English Language Arts (ELA)

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Context & Inquiry

Practicing English middle and secondary teachers struggle to implement social justice and culturally proactive curriculum (Aronson, 2020; Dyches et al., 2021); thus, topics of equity and inclusion have become popular across teacher preparation courses and professional development (Dyches & Boyd, 2017). Additionally, more of the general public is advocating for social changes, influencing what and how teachers teach critical discussions that can disrupt the instinctual silence on past and present social justice events (Boyd, 2017; Wetzel et al., 2019).

Educators are unsure of *what* social justice topics to teach and *how* to implement social justice teaching because the sensitive term *social justice* has become difficult to navigate (Dover, 2013). Teacher preparation courses and professional development need to emphasize social justice education and culturally responsive teaching in their specific content area to successfully teach the content knowledge *and* teach for social justice (Dyches & Boyd, 2017). Social justice topics include (in)equity, causes of social divisions, ethnic/racial awareness, and historical and present cultural representations. This ongoing conversation of social justice acceptance, or the lack of it, stems from school, politics, community, and public responses.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research study is to better understand current challenges, strategies, and perspectives of English critical pedagogy through the lens of culturally relevant teaching practices.

Research Question

How do practicing middle and secondary ELA teachers' implement social justice practices?

Literature review

Theoretical Framework: Culturally Relevant Education (CRE)

Culturally Relevant Education examines how practitioners are implementing social justice practices to parallel current cultural shifts and multi-valued assets in today's society. The researchers are considering teachers' influence and impact on students *and* how they proactively advocate for social justice when thinking about implementing culturally relevant education.

Significant Terminology

Critical Pedagogy

1

Critically analyze and critique one's situated context

2

Consider student backgrounds

3

Model questioning of societal systems

Social Justice & Culturally Responsive Teaching

1

Awareness of social justice shifts

2

Self-reflection of oneself

3

A curriculum that encourages and challenges student perceptions

The Need for Change

Traditional Curriculum

Teaching students as if they come from a mainstream-monocultural environment.

Intent vs Impact

Focus on students' interpretation of social justice education rather than how it was intentionally planned to be perceived.

Hidden Curriculum

Teaching implicit, often unintentional, behaviors creating biased societal/cultural messages.

Apolitical Institution

School is never explicitly seen as a political institution, although governing individuals tend to determine what should be taught.

Homogenous Profession

There is a lack of diversified teacher representation and curriculum to support students of color.

Methods

Participant & Setting

- Purposeful criterion sample
- Six practicing middle or secondary Teachers
- Southeastern region of the U.S.
- The state demographics report:
 - 70% White
 - 22% African American
 - 10% Hispanic or Latinx
 - 3% Asian, 2% American Indian
 - The remainder are multiracial
- Students taught by participants represent the State's minority population
- Chancellor's Diversity Fund provided \$200 stipends each semester to each participant

Table 1

Participant Background Experience*

| Participant | Identity: Gender & Race | Years of Experience | School Type | Grade Levels |
|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Teacher A | Male, Black | 1 | Urban, Suburban, Public | 9, 10, 11 |
| Teacher B | Female, White | 1/3 | Rural, Public | 11, 12 |
| Teacher C | Female, Black | 5 | Urban, Public | 7, 8 |
| Teacher D | Female, Black | 1 | Rural, Public | 9, 11 |
| Teacher E | Female, White | 1/3 | Rural, Public | 7 |
| Teacher F | Female, Biracial (Black & White) | 3 | Rural, Suburban, Public, Charter | 9, 10 |

* Note: This table depicts self-reported data from the per-survey.

Data Sources

Pre & Post-Survey

- Teachers shared their teaching experience with social justice and culturally proactive implementation
- Likert-scale and open-ended responses

Focus Group Discussion

- One hour and thirty minute virtual meeting
- Discussed pre-planned questions regarding "Critical Literacy as a Tool for Social Change: Negotiating tensions in a pre-service teacher education writing course"

Data Analysis

Comparative Analysis

Short Analytic Memos

Themes/Categories

Consensus on Findings

Digital Codebook

Findings & Discussion

Authenticity

Authentic Teaching Practices

- Obligation to "teach to the test" (Teachers C, D, E & F) but, "surely more authentic and more real is the answer," so "why not forget the test and try to teach them something that's real?" (Teacher E)
- Toggle between process vs. product
 - Writing instruction should be student driven

Authentic Conversations

- Develop over time; "these more difficult conversations that are a little more uncomfortable, and a little more difficult to wrap your head around, those are just going to be slower starting" (Teacher E)
- Discussing real world issues in the classroom
 - Students are so engaged with their phones, "trying to escape [their] reality," and the classroom setting creates a space to talk about real contexts (Teacher C)
- Conversations regarding student work ethic and goals

Student Interest

Pairing Contextual Components with Texts

- Utilize online resources (e.g., articles, social media, and current events) to discuss the historical/situational context of a text
 - "[S]tories, literature or things like that to sort of give us reasons for why we see the things that we see in the world occurring. It tends to become more insightful... when we can root it in an article or a short story or an autobiography" (Teacher F)

Altering Teacher Perspectives to See Student Perspectives

- "“They just don't care about this,’ but I honestly think that we underestimate what they do actually care about.” (Teacher C)
- For students to become interested with the content, "it's essential to get the kids reading something that they're engaged in" (Teacher E)
- "Students often need a 'why,' like why we're doing this, why we're writing this paper or reading this book, etc. That can sometimes be their driving factor to engage in what we're doing" (Teacher F)

Technology: Social Media & Current Events

Types of Technology Usage

- Productive vs Impediment
- Using technology to prepare students for future employment
 - "Is there a balance between instructional technology tools vs technology social practices?" (Teacher D)
 - Students should "engage with each other in person," and also be "prepared for when they enter the workforce" (Teacher A)

Integration of Social Media & Current Events

- Creating critical conversation through trends
 - Research Hawaii tourism Tik Tok trends and its impact on state residents
 - "Their assignment was to make a video talking about the history and respecting cultures" (Teacher B)
 - "Let's talk about why hashtag stop Asian hate is trending...why that's such a big buzzword.... why people are upset" (Teacher F)

Meeting Students Where They Are

Reading Texts Off-Grade Level

- "Sometimes I don't want to use a grade level text only because I want everybody to be able to follow along with the activity" (Teacher A)
- Consequences of meeting students who are below grade level
 - "I don't want to drop them too low because we do have to test on grade level. The lowest I've gone is 9th grade 'cause that still has some high school vocabulary in it, and they still struggle." (Teacher B)
 - "The biggest issue with dropping text down—you may have a 12th grader, but you're only giving them 6th grade work—is when it comes down to state testing." (Teacher D)

Systemic Power: Standardized Curriculum/Tests

- "I've always had the EOC looming over us" (Teacher F)
- Majority of students struggle with illiteracy and "nobody is going to read to them on the state test" (Teacher D)
- Teachers select small, easier texts to *check it off the list*

Conclusion

With the sample of six middle and secondary teachers from a Southeastern region of the United States, the researchers further understood how teachers implement social justice pedagogy. The surveys implicitly reported that teachers feel more confident in implementing social justice practices more often due to reading the provided article and discussing common struggles with other teachers during the focus group. The findings from the discussion highlighted how authentic teaching practices lead to transparent conversations with students. Additionally, social media integration in relation to current event analysis, understanding and applying student interests, and meeting students where they are, are critical components of social justice teaching practices. Although the teachers differentiate to benefit students individually, they still feel compelled to teach standardized curriculum to all students for the End of Year state exam.

Limitations

Small Criterion Sample

Only Middle & Secondary Teachers

Regionally Scattered Participants

Implications

Practitioner Professional Development

All Academic Domains

Teaching Resources & Preparation

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