



# Listening to many voices: Enacting social justice literacy curriculum



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Key influences on teacher decision-making: students and colleagues.
- Resistance to standardized curriculum is possible even for early-career teachers.
- Social justice teaching in action: challenges, obstacles, tensions and sources of support.
- Longitudinal study following secondary pre-service teachers into their first years in the field.
- Discourse analysis using Bakhtin's theories of social heteroglossia and reported speech.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 23 February 2016  
Received in revised form  
18 September 2016  
Accepted 1 October 2016

### Keywords:

Social justice  
English education  
Secondary education  
Urban schools  
Educational change  
Teacher decision-making

## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand what struggles an equity-minded English teacher encountered while enacting social justice curriculum and pedagogy. Data indicated the primary factors that influenced the teacher's understandings were her students and grade-level colleagues, not administrative mandates or the state standardized test. An additional finding was that the conflicts that Octavia anticipated as a pre-service teacher (competing reform agendas) were less relevant than concerns about reading materials and text selection. The study indicates a need to shift attention to less-commonly studied factors in teacher decision-making: quality instructional resources, interpersonal relationships, and ideologies about curriculum.

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## 1. Introduction: the need for school change

Linguistic standardization, racial and class discrimination, hierarchical teaching and learning structures, and rigid curriculum structures have been longstanding injustices in schools, particularly in the United States. Endemic disparities in education become particularly problematic in the context of an English Language Arts class, because of its focus on language. As scholars of linguistics and culture have documented extensively, there are strong ties between language and cultural identity, which have significant implications for students who are punished for using non-dominant languages in school settings (Ball, 2009) or positioned as deficient because their language practices do not conform to a dominant variety

(Hymes, 1972; Janks, 2000; Kinloch, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, despite a contentious disciplinary history and lack of consensus of what counts as “English” as a discipline in university contexts, secondary English curricula tend to focus on White Anglo literary traditions and formulaic writing tasks done in academic language (Heller, 2010).

### 1.1. Responses to educational inequity

In the face of these hegemonic traditions, progressive educators from Dewey (1938) to Freire (1970) and contemporary activists in education and literacy (Comber, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014) have consistently called for new ways of doing school that value students' interests and diversity. Yet despite this persistent work, educational achievement in literacy remains static across the United States, and some racial disparities in achievement

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have actually increased.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, we have not made enough progress towards the goals that theorists and policymakers have proposed for schooling.

What, then, are the forces holding us back? This study attempts to answer some of these questions in an empirical, rather than theoretical fashion. In order to better understand the forces of resistance in place in an urban school and to offer productive support, this study seeks to understand what struggles Octavia,<sup>2</sup> an equity-minded English teacher, encountered while enacting social justice curriculum and pedagogy, how she made sense of these struggles, and who informed her decision-making as a teacher.

### 1.2. Teaching for social justice: change for the better

There are myriad definitions of what counts as social justice in teaching. Indeed, the concept itself has been critiqued as “ambiguous ... widespread but undertheorized and vague” (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, & Terrell, 2009, p. 347). As Bender-Slack (2010) illustrated in her study with English Language Arts teachers in the greater Cincinnati area, each of the 22 teachers interviewed had different definitions of social justice and different visions for how it applied to the curriculum. For the majority of teachers (n = 18), enacting social justice curriculum did not involve explicitly challenging the literary canon or acknowledging systems of power in society that perpetuate inequity. Teachers cited fear of disturbing various educational stakeholders and a desire to keep their classes “safe” (p. 192) as reasons for not engaging in a critique of the canon or discussion of potentially disturbing social inequities. Additionally, Lazar (2013) found similar discontinuities among teachers’ perceptions of social justice by looking across three teachers’ narratives of working in urban schools. Some teachers blamed students’ families and local community for their lack of opportunity, taking on what Valencia (1997) would characterize as a deficit perspective on students’ sociocultural realities. Yet other teachers developed positive relationships with caregivers and parents, allowing them to “understand and appreciate their knowledge traditions and cultural capital” (p. 722).

The central participant in this study, Octavia, graduated from an M.Ed. program that focused on issues of social justice in teaching, and this was at the forefront of her mind when defining her role in the classroom. She declared in her 2014 interview that “the ultimate purpose of the language arts classroom is promoting social justice.” Answering Cochran-Smith et al. (2009)’s call to explicitly define social justice teaching in context, I will do so briefly.

Octavia’s pre-service program articulated its focus as “valuing the diverse linguistic and cultural resources students bring into the classroom” (Program Brochure, 2015) and was informed by pedagogical approaches that value student autonomy (Bomer, 2011), resource-based perspectives towards diverse students (Skerrett, 2012), as well as theoretical approaches to teaching such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and literacy as a vehicle for individual liberation and social change (Freire, 1970). The program’s coursework and fieldwork were designed to “acknowledge the social and political concepts in which teaching, learning, schooling, and ideas about justice have been located historically as well as

acknowledging the tensions among competing goals” (Cochran-Smith, 2010, p. 447). This understanding of social justice is reflected in Early and Shagoury’s (2010) study of early-career teachers who graduated from similarly equity-focused teacher preparation programs. The eight teachers in this study “drew on their training to build community and foster independent learning in their diverse classrooms and to serve as their students’ advocates” (p. 1056).

Further exploration of the nature of social justice teaching as well as Octavia’s understanding of the concept will be presented in the findings sections, including data that illustrate how Octavia’s construction of social justice met the three criteria Cochran-Smith (2010) outlines as necessary: 1) equity of learning opportunity, 2) respect for social groups, and 3) acknowledging and dealing with tensions.

### 1.3. Teaching English Language Arts differently: change is hard

Much of the literature that documents teaching for social justice takes place in the context of after-school settings or non-traditional classes (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009), whereas the realm of English Language Arts curriculum and pedagogy (a tested and mandated subject area) has proven resistant to change in reading (Lewis & Dockter, 2010) and writing practice (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Carving out space for curriculum change and social justice work as a pre-service teacher is a process often challenged by colleagues and administrators, one that continues into in-service teaching (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015).

Teachers with social justice agendas are up against more than just curriculum traditions; they also confront deficit ideologies about culturally and linguistically diverse populations typical in urban schools, where ‘urban’ can become a racialized code for bad, dangerous, or struggling (Milner, 2012). Thus, ideological and instructional conflicts often arise as teachers move from social justice oriented teacher preparation programs to professional communities in urban schools (Craig, 2013; Flores, 2007; Lazar, 2013). There are empirical examples of teachers doing this work in isolation, yet change remains small-scale. As new urban teachers report needing communities to affirm and support a social justice agenda after disengaging from their schools’ communities that adhere to deficit-based views of students (Craig, 2013; Quartz, 2003) and old-fashioned notions of literacy curriculum (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006), it is important to continue to document teachers’ efforts to teach towards equity to establish patterns of success and continue to grow social justice teaching.

## 2. Methods

This study is situated within a larger, longitudinal study (Miles & Huberman, 1994) related to urban English teacher development which began in the spring of 2013, when Octavia and her cohort finished their first year of graduate school. This study bridges phase I of the longitudinal study, the participants’ pre-service experience, and phase II, their experiences in their first 5 years of teaching. I analyzed data from one calendar year: Spring 2014–Spring 2015 when Octavia was a 9th grade ELA teacher at Colina High.

Colina High is the only high school in a district adjacent to University City, a mid-sized city in the southwest. University City and some of its surrounding districts have been classified as “urban emergent” as they are in the process of significant demographic change; at the time of the 2010 census University City was the fastest growing metropolitan area in the country. The distinction of urban emergent is important because the city’s schools “do not experience the magnitude of the challenges” (Milner, 2012, p. 560) seen in densely populated metropolitan areas, but are similarly

<sup>1</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that 12th graders’ average scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Assessment have fallen since the first administration of the test in 1992. The gap between White and Black students’ 12th Grade Reading Scores increased 24% in the past thirty years (from 24 points in 1992 to 29 points in 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Octavia is the pseudonym the focal teacher selected, in reference to one of her favorite authors, Octavia E. Butler, known for speculative fiction. The school name is also a pseudonym.

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