

Empowering Students to Think Critically and Compassionately by Teaching Social Justice
through Literature

by

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Abstract

This thesis is my own exploration of the need for an English language arts curriculum that promotes compassion and critical thinking, as well as various ways to create and employ it. Driven by a desire to incorporate effective, standards-based teaching and sensitive, multicultural education into a curriculum that promotes empathy and critical thinking, I have arrived at the conclusion that literature is a powerful tool in achieving this goal. It is the expectation, after all, of the English teacher to relay the messages found in literature to their pupils: messages of struggle, triumph, and justice, messages that shed light on the human condition, foster empathy, and give glimpses into the lives of others who may seem vastly different. I have also included a case study on a former educator who received backlash for teaching social justice through literature, a unit plan, and a rubric for assessing student learning.

Introduction

As a pre-service English teacher on the precipice of a career in education, I have many concerns and goals for the kind of educator that I will be. Informed by internships, student teaching experiences, and a not-so-distant past career as a high school student, I believe that too often, English instruction is focused heavily on things like the memorization of literary devices, SAT-prep vocabulary, and passing standardized, end-of-the-year tests. Well-intentioned teachers sometimes resist the conviction to utilize multicultural literature and teach about social justice, opting instead for the safer route, one that is characterized by self-censorship and fear of being reprimanded. I believe that literature, when it is mindfully chosen, is the ideal tool for making difficult, sometimes controversial, conversations more easily accessible and bringing diverse perspectives into every classroom. English teachers have the license and the resources to explore various ways to make use of literature, the study of language, and other suitable media that open up the world to their students and address controversial issues in a digestible way. There are ways to teach about difference and justice through literature that satisfy and exceed the goals set forth by curricular standards, and the adherence to these standards can be used as a defense for when progressive teaching practices come under fire by administrators or community members.

To me, the teacher who does not at least attempt to prompt their students to critically evaluate the world around them is inadvertently teaching the principles of complacency and satisfaction with the status quo. The notion of being complicit in the perpetuation of imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal values that have shaped the world in which we live and are on the rise today is frightening. That is not the teacher that I want to be.

When I envision the kind of high school English teacher that I hope to become, I picture an educator who prompts her students to question societal institutions and their effects on our lives. I want to teach English in such a way that the texts inspire my students to consider lives and perspectives outside of their own while becoming more intimately acquainted with their own rich inner lives. I want to subvert some of the old ideals that contribute to inequality both inside and outside of schools by teaching my students to see beyond them.

When I look back at my own high school experience (a time from which I am not very far removed), I note a difference that took place both within the dynamic of my class and within myself during junior year. Our beloved English teacher, Ms. Hughes, created a safe and respectful environment in her classroom, one that fostered debate, collaboration, critique, and authentic sharing. One day in particular strikes me as a turning point both in the class as well as in my life. After reading *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and learning what a vignette was, we were prompted with the task of writing vignettes of our own. Each student knew that their narratives would be read aloud, and every single person still chose to write about something in their life that was personal and intimate.

The day came to read our vignettes out loud. One by one, students shared beautifully written, detailed narratives about divorce, mental health issues, death, disappointment, and fear. Tears were shed, and students lifted each other up in ways that I had never seen in a classroom prior to that day. Ms. Hughes had built a community of her class, one in which the members felt valued and respected. The practice resulted in an experience that was cathartic, moving, and sacred. I am so thankful that I was given the opportunity to share some of the

hardest parts of my life in a safe space at an age in which all I wanted was someone who would listen.

Not all efforts to build community result in moments of candid sharing and joyful bonding, and that is okay. In fact, tension and strife are essential ingredients in any authentic community. In *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, Linda Christensen shares “...real community is forged out of struggle. Students won’t always agree on issues, and the fights, arguments, tears and anger are the crucible from which a real community grows” (Christensen 2). I am hopeful that one day, through literature-based teaching and community-building, I can forge a classroom community in which students feel valued, safe, and are empowered to think for themselves.

This thesis is my own exploration of the need for an English language arts curriculum that promotes compassion and critical thinking, as well as various ways to create and employ it. Driven by a desire to incorporate effective, standards-based teaching and sensitive, multicultural education into a curriculum that promotes empathy and critical thinking, I have arrived at the conclusion that literature is a powerful tool in achieving this goal. It is the expectation, after all, of the English teacher to relay the messages found in literature to their pupils: messages of struggle, triumph, and justice, messages that shed light on the human condition, foster empathy, and give glimpses into the lives of others who may seem vastly different.

Literature is Powerful

In order to prepare future generations of civic leaders to think critically and compassionately about social institutions and the world at large, teachers must prompt their students to better understand their own identities and experiences as well as those of others.

This is not an easy task, and I know from experience that the notion of creating a curriculum that satisfies these requirements is daunting for a new teacher. As Sherry Marx states in *Revealing the Invisible: Confronting Racism in Teacher Education*, “Because contemporary White Americans have been conditioned not to think about race, and especially not to talk about it, facing the topic can be a challenging, frustrating, and even frightening experience for many” (21). This statement applies not only to pre-service teachers who are unsure about establishing an effective anti-racist curriculum, but to all teachers and students who feel uncomfortable initiating and sustaining productive discussions about difference in the classroom.

A powerful and palatable way that students can engage in these conversations and connect to the diverse world around them is through the reading, discussing, and engaged listening of stories. The stories that are shared in the high school English classroom, whether they are found in literature textbooks or in the collective texts of students’ personal experiences, allow readers to tap into a widely underused receptacle of empathy that we all possess. Traditionally, students are not explicitly taught to access this receptacle of empathy in their schooling because it is not considered an academic pursuit.

Literature also has the capacity to make its readers more aware of the profound similarities between otherwise apparently different people who are sharing in the human condition. Literature can diminish prejudices and plant seeds of social justice in the minds of students when difficult-to-digest facts and figures sometimes cannot, for books and stories enable the reader to briefly occupy the lives of and share experiences with characters who are different from them (Bieger 309). In other words, reading literature builds empathy (“the ability to understand and share the feelings of another,” according to the *Oxford English*

Dictionary). Literature is not just an effective tool for teaching about social justice -- it is affective. Reading can affect a reader's way of thinking in profound ways (Bieger 309). This is important because empathetic students make communities out of their classrooms and continue to play an active civic role in their larger communities.

Teachers and educational theorists are not the only ones to argue that literature has the power to build empathy in students. The results from a 2014 neuroscience study have shown that literary fiction is an effective tool for improving Theory of Mind (ToM), or "The capacity to identify and understand others' subjective states and emotions" in readers (Kidd and Castano 377). The results of this intriguing study show that reading about the complex characters presented in fiction improves readers' ToM (Kidd and Castano 380). The implications of this and similar studies are that students who read literature in English class are better equipped to navigate interpersonal relationships and show empathy on larger scales as well.

In Emily Style's 1996 essay "Curriculum as Window and Mirror," the educator and co-founder of the National SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project presents the argument that in order to create a curriculum in which all students are equitably served, the material that is taught must act as a window into a world that is different from students' own as well as a mirror into which students can see themselves reflected in their learning (1). In other words, curriculum should contain representation of different kinds of people for it to be equally accessible and meaningful. English language arts teachers are fortunate because they have the responsibility and the privilege to teach with an invaluable resource of mirrors and windows: literature.

In *“It’s Our World Too”*: *Socially Responsive Learners in Middle School Language Arts* by Beverly Busching and Betty Ann Slesinger, the authors discuss the role of literature as a “repository of cultural values” and its potential to empower students to get inside the hearts, minds, and lives of others (146). The authors echo Emily Style’s conviction of the necessity for curriculum to serve as both window and mirror and apply it directly to the teaching of language arts when they state that “Students need to see their own lives interpreted and validated in the books they read, and they also need to see the wide panoply of humanity, not just to watch these characters enact their lives, but also to see into their lives” (Busching and Slesinger 146). When choosing the texts, assignments, and assessments that make up a unit, the English teacher must be mindful of the potential that these choices have in empowering their students to think critically and compassionately about the world around them and people whose lifespaces may be vastly different from their own. Thoughtfully planned activities for carefully chosen texts can significantly expand and lend nuance to the ways in which students view themselves and people who seem totally unlike them (Busching and Slesinger 144).

Literature has the power to open a reader’s eyes to the struggles, victories, and feelings of characters, to truly understand others by stepping inside their lives, even if just for a brief moment (Style 2). Good books can dispel prejudice, break down barriers, and prompt readers to question what they think they know (Glasgow 54). There is a reason that medical doctors are often told to read fiction literature in order to build empathy and improve bedside manner, and there is a reason that prisoners are encouraged to read fiction literature as a means of rehabilitation: Literature is powerful (Kidd and Castano 380).

The Necessity of Multicultural Literature

The 2014 Theory of Mind study reinforces the assertion that literature is powerful by proving that reading can build empathy (Kidd and Castano 380). When readers are empowered with the ability to access an abundance of diverse perspectives and stories through multicultural literature, they begin to feel empathy and solidarity with people and cultures that are different. Giving student readers this opportunity is an effective starting point in teaching social justice in the English classroom (Gibson and Parks 41).

Curriculum cannot act as both a window and a mirror to all students if it is not multicultural. It is unfair to all students, no matter their identities, if the curriculum to which they are exposed does not present them with narratives that illuminate what is unknown and validate what is known (Style 5). As Style eloquently states in “Curriculum as Window and Mirror,”

It is limiting and inaccurate to only educate our children provincially when they must live their lives in a global context, facing vast differences and awesome similarities.

They must learn early and often about the valid framing of both windows and mirrors for a balanced, ecological sense of their place(s) in the world. (5)

According to *The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce*, a 2016 report from The U.S. Department of Education, 82% of public school teachers are white, while 49% of public elementary and secondary school students are individuals of color (5-6). This disparity is one of the many reasons that teachers need to incorporate literature that values various viewpoints into a year long curriculum. It is not enough for literature teachers to develop the occasional unit on African Americans in February or Native Americans during November, as is often the case. In order to teach a curriculum that is culturally relevant, teachers must employ multicultural literature consistently (Gibson and Parks 42).

Teachers who wish to implement multicultural education -- the process of educating that is founded upon the concept that all students deserve the opportunity to learn in school regardless of cultural, gender, racial, class, or ethnic differences -- must integrate content that represents and celebrates various cultures and groups into their whole curriculum. Some subjects, like math and science, are typically not seen as subjects that offer many opportunities for the integration of culturally diverse and sensitive content (Banks 20). English language arts is a subject that easily lends itself to the integration of content that represents and showcases diverse perspectives and identities (Bieger 308).

The significance of using multicultural literature in the classroom does not lie solely in the fact that it fosters a sense of empathy for different types of readers -- literature that accurately depicts diverse cultures is necessary for ensuring that academic success is accessible to students who are historically underserved in education. In "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," Gloria Ladson-Billings stresses the importance of culturally responsive teaching, or a "synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture," to make education more equitable for all students. Minority students perform better when culturally relevant pedagogy is employed and their backgrounds are reflected in their learning (Ladson-Billings 467). The notion that minority students are underserved in education is reinforced by a report from the National Center for Education Statistics, which states that reading scores for twelfth-grade students in 2015 indicate a thirty point White-Black achievement gap and a twenty point White-Hispanic achievement gap ("Status" 46). English language arts teachers can attempt to narrow these gaps by selecting culturally responsive literature for reading instruction.

Unfortunately, the dominant narrative that is most represented in the traditional canon of literature is one that only privileges a very small group of people – namely white, middle-class, straight, native English-speaking men – and does not lend itself to a complete education because it cannot act as a mirror for students who do not possess those identities or a window for those who do (Glazier and Seo 687). It is important that English teachers search for literature outside of the traditional canon for texts that present authentic perspectives and portray accurate and multidimensional portrayals of various kinds of people (Yokota 19).

Defining Multicultural Literature

Multicultural literature has been defined in many different ways. In the introduction to *Kaleidoscope*, NCTE's booklist for multicultural children's literature, Junko Yokota presents the multiple categories that attempts of defining the term tend to fall into: "1. those that assume that *multiple + culture = multiculturalism*, 2. those that focus on 'people of color,' and 3. those that assert that *all* literature is multicultural" (Yokota 13). In *Multiple Definitions of Multicultural Literacy: Is the Debate Really Just 'Ivory Tower' Bickering?* Mingshui Cai presents an analysis of the three categories and reasons for why they might all be considered problematic. Yokota summarizes this analysis in *Kaleidoscope*:

The first perspective, which results in a "tourist" approach that includes as much exposure to as many cultures as possible by giving equal treatment to unequal groups, is overly idealistic. The reasons for focusing on "people of color" are rooted in the "discrimination, oppression, and exploitation" of some groups of people who have been marginalized by others. However, the inclusion only of ethnic groups entails the unjustifiable exclusion of other groups who have also experienced such treatment

(e.g., religious minority groups, gay and lesbians, etc.). Seeing all literature as multicultural leads to a degree of inclusiveness that dilutes the focus so much that it becomes meaningless. (13)

Yokota says that each of the three most common perspectives on multicultural literature have merit: the first because it offers an introduction to a variety of cultures in the classroom rather than privileging any one group; the second because it gives voice to a population (people of color) who have historically been silenced, particularly in schools; and the third because it is based upon the “reasonable belief” that the meaning of a book depends on the reader and that “we are all members of multiple cultures” (Yokota 14). I agree with both Cai and Yokota: Any one definition of multicultural literature, however well-intentioned, is problematic. No matter how it is defined, the teaching of multicultural literature must not be a buffet-style sampling of as many cultures as possible, but rather an intentional effort to include underrepresented perspectives in education.

In “Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum,” Rudine Sims Bishop again addresses how difficult it is to define the term “multicultural literature.” Bishop points out the fact that the books most likely to be named “multicultural” are those about people other than white, middle class Americans. Therefore, calling this literature by a different name perpetuates the notion that white, middle class Americans are the norm, while everyone else is “The Other” (Bishop 3). The term is positive as well, though, because it focuses attention to groups of people whose stories are often “omitted, distorted, or undervalued in society and in school curricula” (Bishop 3). Yokota also acknowledges this catch-22, pointing out the fact that labelling certain books in bookstores or libraries as “multicultural” positively

highlights books that represent diverse and culturally authentic perspectives while also implicitly sending a message to certain readers that says “not for me” (Yokota 15).

Bishop provides her own answer to the question of definition when she says that, “in the absence of a more accurate, widely accepted term,” individuals must arrive to their own conclusions about what multicultural literature is (3). The author then offers her own definition: “It should include books that reflect the racial, ethnic, and social diversity that is characteristic of our pluralistic society and of the world” (Bishop 3). For this thesis and my practice as an English teacher, I agree with this definition, as well as the assertion made by Jocelyn Glazier and Jung-A Seo that multicultural literature is “literature that represents voices typically omitted from the traditional canon” (686).

Using Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature is also used widely among teachers who wish to venture from the restrictive traditional canon into a more diverse and progressive territory. There is currently a vast array of young adult books that contain diverse perspectives, and the number is growing (Landt 690). In *Teaching Social Justice through Young Adult Literature*, Jacqueline N. Glasgow recommends that teachers consider several criteria when selecting literature for the classroom. A book is not always suitable for teaching merely because the spine bears a sticker that reads “multicultural” -- it must also contain literary merit and be at an appropriate reading level (Glasgow 54). Glasgow points to databases like the ALA’s Best Book List, NCTE’s *Teaching for a Tolerant World, 9-12*, and *Against Borders* by Hazel Rochman for choosing which texts to teach (Glasgow 55).

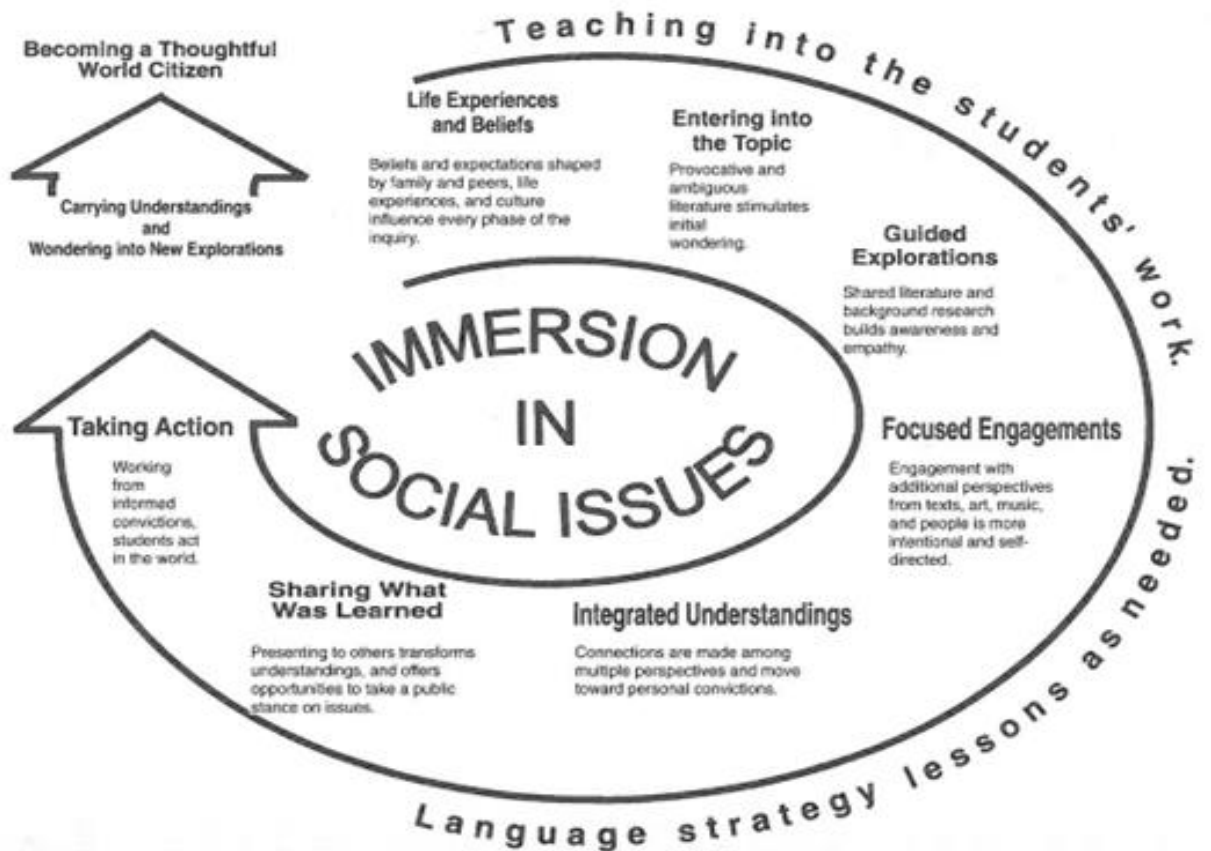
Adolescence is a time of questioning, changing, and grappling with one’s own identity. Young adult literature is written specifically for readers in the midst of this season

and often addresses adolescent concerns such as: evolving family dynamics; determining “moral, ethical, religious, or political principles;” sexuality and puberty; interpersonal relationships; and one’s place in society (Landt 692). When multicultural young adult literature depicts realistic characters of various (often underrepresented) identities who experience the same cross-cultural, adolescent struggles as students in secondary English classrooms, readers are able to make connections with people and groups who are different from them (Landt 692). Multicultural young adult literature is a bridge-building tool that can serve as both a window and mirror for students.

Teaching Justice through Literature

The ways that English educators present and teach literature to their students matters. Using multicultural texts is only one step in using literature to teach social justice. As Karen Gibson and Marguerite W. Parks state in “Toward Social Justice: Literature to Promote Multiple Perspectives,” “The potential for literature to engage readers toward new discoveries about the world and their varied roles in that world should not be underestimated; however, simply reading the literary selections does not automatically guarantee new insights for the reader. Reader response opportunities must also be provided” (43). Teachers need to give students opportunities to make their own connections with and form their own opinions about a text. English teachers can initiate this kind of personal investment in a text by inserting opportunities for discussion, composition, research, and discovery in a literature unit.

Busching and Slesinger use an adapted version of the inquiry model for teaching from *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers* (1996) by Short, Harste, and Burke to teach literature-based units on social issues related to historical topics, pictured below.



The authors believe that units in an English language arts classroom should be organized by topic rather than theme because teachers can unintentionally limit students' responses and interpretations to a text that is rich in themes when they pre-assign one to it (13). The inquiry unit model employed by the authors includes seven sequential dimensions that inform planning and lead to the goal of "Becoming a Thoughtful World Citizen" (Busching and Slesinger 14). The model offers several opportunities for students to engage with numerous differing perspectives regarding social issues found within a unit's anchor text and arrive to their own conclusions about it. The model encourages critical thinking by prompting students to construct their own thoughts about social issues based off of research and fact, rather than simply regurgitating the opinions of their teachers.

When Slesinger taught a unit on social issues of the Depression era with the anchor text *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* using the adapted inquiry model, the students developed a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the very real issues that informed the plight of the fictional Logan family. Prior to the incorporation of the inquiry model for the unit, students were writing and saying that the harsh realities faced by the Logan family were due to bad luck, individual irresponsibility, and “a few bad people in the neighborhood” (Busching and Slesinger 122). After employing the model and the daily inquiry, guided research, and multimodal exploration that it calls for, Slesinger’s eighth grade students began exhibiting an understanding of the institutional racism and poverty that plagued the characters in the novel and real people across the United States (Busching and Slesinger 137).

The Social Justice Standards from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, are also a great resource for incorporating social justice themes into every lesson, from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The Social Justice Standards is meant to guide curriculum design and offer examples of what effective teaching for social justice looks like. There are specific standards and learning outcomes for grades nine through twelve. They are divided into four domains -- identity, diversity, justice, and action -- based upon Louise Derman-Sparks’ “Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children.”

As the continuum of standards progresses, so do the levels of engagement and activism in the intended outcomes. Lessons that incorporate these standards should progress from making students aware of their own identities (ID.9-12.1: “I have a positive view of myself, including an awareness of and comfort with my membership in multiple groups in society.”), to increasing students’ tolerance of others (DI.9-12.6: “I interact comfortably and

respectfully with all people, whether they are similar to or different from me.”), to empowering students with the knowledge to identify stereotypes and express empathy (JU.9-12.11: “I relate to all people as individuals rather than representatives of groups and can identify stereotypes when I see or hear them.”), to enabling students with the skills to stand up to injustice and take an active stance against prejudice (AC.9-12.19 “I stand up to exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination, even when it’s not popular or easy or when no one else does.”). The Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards offers a reasonable guide for creating a curriculum that teaches justice through literature and empowers students to translate the eye-opening messages discovered in multicultural literature, research, and discussion and do something with them.

Backlash and Censorship

In his essay entitled “Teaching for Social Justice,” Herbert Kohl offers practical advice to the fledgling teacher with lofty goals for teaching social justice, and he also laments the state of a society in which “self-interest and personal gain” are more highly valued than “compassion and the communal good” (36). It is this societal perversion of priorities that Kohl regards as the cause for the need to defend the decision to teach social justice in the classroom. Regardless of the cause, it is difficult to dispute the fact that most teachers who aspire to teach for social justice feel the need to defend their actions and teaching philosophies to students, administrators, colleagues, and parents in order to avoid reprobation. The fear of getting into trouble is enough to deter some teachers from even trying.

Many teachers do try, though, and many succeed. In the face of old-fashioned administrations, conservative communities, and sometimes even parent-initiated book

challenges, there are teachers everywhere who succeed in the teaching of social justice. Such was the case in October 2013 when a parent challenged the assignment of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* to a sophomore honors English class at Watauga High School in Boone, North Carolina. Mary Kent Whitaker, the former English teacher who assigned the novel and had taught it in the past, fought the challenge for five months until, in February of 2014, the challenge was denied. *The House of the Spirits* is a novel that offers diverse perspectives across space and time. Students who read the novel become intimate with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of female protagonists in Chile. It is also a well-written study in magical realism. The parent who challenged the novel described it as “‘horrific,’ ‘graphic,’ and ‘immoral,’ and said the challenging themes and ideas the book presents are lost within the novel’s graphic depictions of rape, prostitution, violence, abuse, abortion, and death” (Oakes).

At the height of the backlash from the book challenge, every teacher in the English department of Watauga High School received hate mail. The letters contained claims that the teachers were deserving of the violence and abuse that takes place in the novel, and many of them contained death threats. Op-ed commentary from members of the community were published in local newspapers calling for Mary Kent Whitaker to be fired. At the last minute, the venue of the final meeting had to be changed from the high school to the courthouse because there needed to be metal detectors in case a deranged detractor tried to bring a gun. In spite of all this, Ms. Whitaker did not waver in her fight for justice. “Teachers must be brave and fearless,” she says. “And this means, of course, always putting our students first. It means not just teaching our students, but advocating for them and fighting for what they need and deserve.”

I spoke with Ms. Whitaker numerous times about her experiences, and she had many helpful things to say about teaching for social justice. Ms. Whitaker advised me to join the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), for they helped to support her in her five-month battle of defending her choices as a teacher. Ms. Whitaker was also able to present about her experiences at NCTE conferences in a presentation titled “Nobody Expects the Spanish Inquisition: One Teacher’s Story of Surviving a Book Challenge at Her High School.” The former English teacher has been celebrated and awarded by her students, her school, her district, and national organizations like NCTE and the American Civil Liberties Union for her persistence in fighting for the freedom to assign books that teach students valuable real-world lessons in a global context. “I respect my students,” Ms. Whitaker once told me. This statement is evident in the way that she addresses her role as an educator.

A firm believer in the power of education to open hearts and minds, Ms. Whitaker taught for many years with the poignant words “Ignorance → Fear → Prejudice → Hate → Violence” on her board. The words served as a reminder to both teacher and students of the importance of the work they were doing in class. “They were a part of the tapestry of my teaching and a constant visual for my students,” says the former English teacher. “My goal was to teach my students to be informed, educated, critical thinkers.” When asked about the types of texts which she used to teach her students how to be informed and critical thinkers, Ms. Whitaker points to multicultural literature, which she defines as “works that are not in the white, male canon that has been the primary basis of high school and university study for centuries.” Some recurring favorites from over the years for Ms. Whitaker have been *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, *Native Son* by Richard Wright, and, of course, *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende.

Ms. Whitaker also made an important point about incorporating social justice into her teaching even when using traditional, canonical texts in certain units. “Even when I taught a book such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” she explains, “I brought in issues of social justice. I taught social justice through every unit.” Ms. Whitaker talked about racism in the nation, state, community, and school during the teaching of this text, showing students pictures of the racist vandalism of a Black History Month bulletin board at Watauga High School and initiating conversations about the use of the N-word in the book and today with resources from Teaching Tolerance. The students also did a simultaneous research unit on modern day slavery. “Most students were completely unaware that slavery exists today throughout the world and within their state and nearby cities,” explains Ms. Whitaker. “This is one of the most powerful units I taught.”

Having experienced resistance firsthand, Ms. Whitaker felt that it was important to stress the importance of using teaching and curriculum standards to support the pedagogical decisions that I will make pertaining to teaching for social justice in the future. Ms. Whitaker pointed out to me that several of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards charge public school teachers in our state with the task of “establishing a respectful environment for a diverse population of students,” as stated in Standard 2 (3). It is the expectation that an effective North Carolina teacher will “Demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultures; Select materials and develop lessons that counteract stereotypes and incorporate contributions; Recognize the influences on a child’s development, personality, and performance; and Consider and incorporate different points of view” (3). It is important for teachers to have knowledge of these standards when a traditional rationale will not satisfy detractors of their texts of choice and teaching practices.

It is clear from my conversations with Ms. Whitaker that she is passionate about education and the power of literature, and a beginning English teacher like me is very lucky to learn from someone like her. Her wisdom and advice have already informed my philosophy of teaching in profound ways. Her stance on using literature to teach students to be compassionate and critical thinkers is perhaps best summed up in a quote from an email correspondence between us two: “Teachers forced through the pressures of censorship to use only safe or antiseptic works are placed in the morally and intellectually untenable position of lying to their students about the nature and condition of mankind!”

Using Standards

It is almost always possible to use formally enforced standards to buttress a curriculum that does not shy away from controversial content. Creating progressive and engaging lesson plans for the English classroom that foster meaningful and productive conversations about real-world issues while adhering to the North Carolina state-enforced standards and using age-appropriate texts is easier than it sounds. For this thesis, I will use the standards outlined in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for English Language Arts. The new standards were adopted in June 2017 for implementation in the 2017-2018 school year.

Upon inspection of the *North Carolina Standard Course of Study for English Language Arts, K-12* from the Department of Public Instruction, it appears that the incorporation of meaningful conversations and social justice education into the teaching of English to create a conscientious curriculum is not only doable but encouraged. Students in grades nine through twelve are expected to “Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on

grade level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas clearly and persuasively" as well as "Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional research or information is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task" (36). The impassioned debate, collaboration, and exploration of important issues that stem from teaching social justice themes are required in the secondary English classroom, according to state standards.

The ELA standard course of study can also be used to defend the use of multicultural literature in the secondary English classroom. The standards for grades 9-12 state that by the end of each grade, students should "read and understand literature within the 9-10/11-12 text complexity band proficiently and independently for sustained periods of time" (10).

Multicultural texts within this complexity band include "Letter from Birmingham Jail" by Martin Luther King, Jr., *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, and *Black Boy* by Richard Wright.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is a nonprofit organization through which teachers can become certified. Board-certified teachers are recognized as experts in their areas and leaders in their schools, and in the state of North Carolina, NBPTS certified teachers receive pay raises. I have known teachers who have become board-certified after subjecting themselves to the extensive and rigorous application process. Many have needed several attempts to achieve the honor. The NBPT Standards explicitly state that board-certified English language arts teachers "practice fairness and equity because of their commitment to the acceptance and appreciation of others" (26). Standard II: Fairness, Equity,

and Diversity provides an illustration of what the “accomplished” English teacher does consistently:

Accomplished English teachers provide their students with the opportunities to read and view texts that are representative of human diversity in order to explore the scope of humanity, the people they want to become, and the people they do not want to become. Teachers appreciate and respect differences in the personalities and temperaments of students and realize that the backgrounds of students in a single classroom invariably include a tremendous wealth and variety of human experience.

(27)

The standards go on to say that accomplished English teachers “advocate for voices that are silent or not present in the classroom,” “challenge bias,” “are committed to social justice, empowering early adolescents and young adults to start to take control of their own lives,” and “are proactive about respecting and valuing identity, personality, and culture” (27).

The standards that I will use to defend the practice of teaching social justice through English are vetted and recognized on state and national levels. It is important to me that I understand and adhere to these guidelines so that I refer to them when and if my teaching practices are ever called into question. Progressive educators need not fear the repercussions of teaching for social justice when they can align their curriculum with standards. I also invoke the standards to hold myself accountable for creating lessons that are focused on the content. In “Teaching for Social Justice,” Herbert Kohl recalls a time when he was forced to redirect his attention:

When I first began teaching, I jumped into struggles for social justice. During one of my efforts a community person asked: ‘So, what’s going on in your classroom that’s

different from what you're fighting against? Can your students read and do math?' I had to examine my work, which was full of passion and effort but deficient in craft. I realized that I needed to take the time to learn how to teach well, or I couldn't extend myself with authority and confidence in organizing efforts. This is essential for caring teachers. We have to get it right for our own students or we can't presume to take on larger systems, no matter how terrible those larger systems are. (36)

In *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, Linda Christensen also recognizes the need to balance the moral responsibility of teaching for social justice with the professional and ethical duty of teaching one's content when she states "I want to be clear: Bringing student issues into the room does not mean giving up teaching the core ideas and skills of the class; it means using the energy of their connections to drive us through the content" (5). I have known many competent and respected teachers who teach their content well yet also fail to achieve this balance because they do not make an effort to use texts that open up the diverse world for their students or teach about social justice. It is my hope and professional goal that I can at least attempt to achieve this balance every school year.

Unit Plan

Guided by Busching and Slesinger's adapted inquiry model, the Social Justice Standards from Teaching Tolerance, the desire and necessity to meet state-imposed requirements from the *North Carolina Standard Course of Study for English Language Arts, K-12*, and state and national standards for teaching, I have created a unit plan that will engage ninth grade students in a study about identity. The anchor text for the unit, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, is an American Book Award winning example of multicultural, young adult fiction. The novella offers a glimpse inside the life of Esperanza

Cordero, a young Mexican American girl growing up in a poor, urban area. Esperanza's experiences with adolescence, navigating puberty, and family dynamics are immensely relatable to the young adult reader. Through following the protagonist's coming-of-age, students will be empowered to better understand their own burgeoning identities. The text will act as both a window and a mirror. Entering my first year of teaching with units like these will make the goal achieving the balance between teaching content and teaching social justice less daunting.

In "*It's Our World Too*": *Socially Responsive Learners in Middle School Language Arts*, Busching and Slesinger call the inquiry model a tool that can be "adapted to a novel study format in which information is partnered with appealing fictional characters to create student caring and concern and new understandings of historical and social issues" (120). Through the guided research and discussion of the issues presented in *The House of Mango Street*, as well as the exploration of their own identities and the community that is formed when they come together in a shared space, students will complete tasks and assignments that satisfy curriculum standards as well as the Social Justice Standards from Teaching Tolerance.

Busching and Slesinger explain that the inquiry units they taught to their students were "neither preplanned nor unplanned," meaning that they created an outline for the unit with prepared ideas for teaching, but no day-by-day agenda (13). The outlines were based on the objectives that they wanted their students to master, and the activities and assignments that made up the unit were responses to students' needs and suggestions. Since I have never taught this unit and do not have student work to guide my ongoing planning, my unit is more "preplanned" than "unplanned." When I teach this unit to my own students, assignments and

activities may be removed or added in response to the unique makeup of the students in my classroom.

This unit is meant for the beginning of the year or semester. I want it to serve as an introduction to the course, the teacher, the other students that make up the classroom community, and the kind of learning that will take place all year. No one unit or lesson can achieve the goal of unearthing students' full potential think critically and compassionately about how society works. Opportunities for increasing student awareness and understanding must be present throughout the entirety of the course (Busching and Slesinger 13). I believe that the first step in teaching for social justice is building a community out of the classroom. I have had multiple past internships in classes in which the students did not know one another's names. That is why there is a focus on community-building in this unit plan.

Getting to Know Ourselves and Others through *The House on Mango Street*

Life Experiences and Beliefs:

- One the first day, class will begin with a journal prompt: "Name a person, place, or event that has helped to shape you into the person you are today. Describe them. Make sure to use imagery/descriptive language that evokes all five senses." By inviting students to write an informal narrative about a person or incident that is important to them, I am communicating the message that their personal stories are important texts in our classroom.
- I will enter into a conversation with my students in which we assign meaning to the word "identity." Using dictionary definitions and student input, we will arrive at a working definition for the term. We will discuss different aspects that make up an individual's identity and the fact that we are all made up of a web of various

complexities. I will mention gender, sexuality, beliefs, ability, age, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, as well as other items such as favorite food, favorite book, and favorite pastimes.

- Students will create lists of all of the characteristics that make up their unique identities and create word clouds out of them. The word clouds will be displayed around the room as a tangible reminder and celebration of the diversity within the class.
- After reading chapter five of *The House on Mango Street*, “My Name,” students will write their own name poems. Students will use the chapter and the poem “If I Had Been Called Sabrina or Ann, she said” by Margaret Piercy as guides for writing about their own names. Students will be prompted with questions about their names: “Is it a family name? Is it from a baby name book? Alternatively, what does your name mean to you? What is the etymology of your name?”

Entering into the Topic:

- We will revisit chapter two of *The House on Mango Street*, “Hairs.” After reading it aloud, we will discuss its importance. Why do you think that the author chose to include this vignette so early in the novella? Is hair a salient part of some people’s identities? Is it a salient part of yours? I will show students what happens when you Google “Professional hairstyles” vs. “Unprofessional hairstyles,” and we will discuss the difference (all of the results for the first search are images of white women, while all of the results for the second are images of black women).
- Students will read and listen to the lyrics of the song “I Am Not My Hair” by India Arie and journal their reactions.

Guided Explorations:

- Esperanza's hair is an important feature of her identity because it is a marker that signals to the rest of the world that she is different. She is proud of her hair. *The House on Mango Street* chronicles Esperanza's coming-of-age and coming to terms with aspects of her identity. As the students read the novella, they will map the features of Esperanza's identity, her thoughts and feelings toward the feature, and the ways in which others respond to it on the silhouette of a body. For example, students may draw a rice sandwich to represent the time when Esperanza tried to pack lunch like the more privileged kids at her school but had no lunch meat. Students build awareness and empathy about race, class, gender roles, and family dynamics during their study of Esperanza.
- Students will also be prompted to create maps of themselves.

Focused Engagements:

- After completing the novella, students will be prompted to choose their own novels to read from a list that I will provide. Each book is also about an adolescent who is coming into their own in the face of discrimination. Students will be allowed to choose from *Butter* by Erin Jade Lange, the Michael L. Printz award winning *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson.
- Students will be required to keep a journal throughout their reading to document emotional responses to the texts, predictions, and connections to other texts, the world, and their own lives.

Integrated Understandings:

- Students will write dialogue poems between Esperanza Cordero of *The House on Mango Street* and one of the characters in their novels of choice. Students are encouraged to get inside the hearts and minds of the characters and create an authentic conversation between them. Will Melinda from *Speak* offer Esperanza some advice about surviving high school? Will Dante and Aristotle confide in her about the struggles of their families or their sexuality? Will Esperanza and “Butter” get along?
- Students will write letters of advice to their past selves about the process of “growing up.” I will also write a letter to my past self, and I will share it with the class.

Sharing What Was Learned:

- Students will create presentations about the lessons that they learned about identity in this unit. They will be split into groups according to who read which choice book. Students who read *Butter*, for example, will be placed in groups with students who read different texts. Students will share similarities between the characters in their choice texts, the characters in *The House on Mango Street*, and real people they know. They will be encouraged to share how their beliefs about certain types of identities have been affirmed or challenged. They may also include creative components like an interview with a character, a letter to the author, or an alternate ending.

Taking Action:

- The class will join together to create an anti-bullying campaign. Students will create a slogan related to anti-bullying and the theme of identity and create posters, videos, speeches, and flyers. Materials from the campaign will be displayed around the classroom and, if possible, around the school.

North Carolina English Language Arts Standards Met:

RL.9-10.10 By the end of grade 9, read and understand literature within the 9-10 text complexity band proficiently and independently for sustained periods of time. Connect prior knowledge and experiences to text.

RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.9-10.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.9-10.5 Analyze how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text.

W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

W.9-10.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

W.9-10.4 Use digital tools and resources to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

SL.9-10.5 Make strategic use of digital media in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

L.9-10.1 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking; demonstrate proficiency within the 9-12 grammar continuum.

Social Justice Standards Met:

ID.9-12.1 I have a positive view of myself, including an awareness of and comfort with my membership in multiple groups in society.

ID.9-12.2 I know my family history and cultural background and can describe how my own identity is informed and shaped by my membership in multiple identity groups.

ID.9-12.3 I know that all my group identities and the intersection of those identities create unique aspects of who I am and that this is true for other people too.

DI.9-12.6 I interact comfortably and respectfully with all people, whether they are similar to or different from me

DI.9-12.7 I have the language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including myself) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.

DI.9-12.9 I relate to and build connections with other people by showing them empathy, respect and understanding, regardless of our similarities or differences.

JU.9-12.11 I relate to all people as individuals rather than representatives of groups and can identify stereotypes when I see or hear them.

AC.9-12.16 I express empathy when people are excluded or mistreated because of their identities and concern when I personally experience bias.

AC.9-12.19 I stand up to exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, even when it's not popular or easy or when no one else does.

AC.9-12.20 I will join with diverse people to plan and carry out collective action against exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, and we will be thoughtful and creative in our actions in order to achieve our goals.

Assessing Student Learning

In an effort to ensure that student learning and engagement in units like the one above are assessed objectively, I have developed a rubric for measuring understanding in units like the one above and informing instruction in subsequent units. The rubric is closely adapted from the continuum of Social Justice Standards from Teaching Tolerance. Students' input in discussions and assignments would be assessed using this rubric, and the results would be used to determine logical next steps for instruction. If, for instance, students fail to exhibit a satisfactory level of engagement in the criterion labelled "Justice," then further instruction in that area would be warranted.

	Satisfactory	Emerging	Unsatisfactory
Identity	Student sees self, classmates, and characters in novel study and other media as individuals, rather than representatives of a group; and student shows awareness of and sensitivity to other cultures and identities through writing and	Student sees self, classmates, and characters in novel study and other media as individuals, rather than representatives of a group; and student shows awareness of other cultures and identities through writing and contributions to class	Student expresses attitudes or beliefs that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and exhibit prejudice toward others in writing or class discussion; and/or students view the characters encountered in study of multicultural

	<p>contributions to class discussions; and student celebrates own culture without suggesting that others' cultures are inferior, as evidenced in Name Poems and other writing as well as class discussions; and student actively seeks to learn about people who are perceived as different from them.</p>	<p>discussion; and student celebrates own cultures without suggesting that other's cultures are inferior, as evidenced in Name Poems and other writing as well as class discussions.</p>	<p>literature as representatives for their culture or other group, rather than individuals; and/or student expresses beliefs that their identity or culture is the "best," whether through writing or in class discussion.</p>
Diversity	<p>Student respectfully displays curiosity about people who are different from them, whether in literature or the real world; and student shows empathy for others in actions and speech; and student actively attempts to learn from others about their identities.</p>	<p>Student respectfully displays curiosity about people who are different from them, whether in literature or the real world; and student shows empathy for others in actions and speech.</p>	<p>Student shows intolerance or hatred for people who are different from them; and/or student shows indifference or resistance to learning about people who are different from them; and/or student shows discomfort when forced to interact with classmates who come from different backgrounds.</p>
Justice	<p>Student can identify injustice or unfairness when they see it; and student can recognize the unearned societal advantages that are afforded to members of certain identity groups; and student takes initiative in learning more about issues pertaining to social justice.</p>	<p>Student can identify injustice or unfairness when they see it; and student is beginning to recognize the unearned societal advantages that are afforded to members of certain identity groups; and student seeks to learn more about issues pertaining to social justice.</p>	<p>Student cannot distinguish justice from injustice when they see it; and/or student does not recognize the unearned societal advantages that are afforded to members of certain identity groups; and/or student does not seek to learn about social justice.</p>

Action	Student stands up to prejudice, unfairness, bullying, and injustice when confronted with it; and student collaborates with others to organize action against injustices; and student is sensitive to the diverse ideas and contributions of others.	Student stands up to prejudice, unfairness, bullying, and injustice when confronted with it; and student seeks to collaborate with others to organize and carry out action against injustice.	Student acts as a “bystander,” ignoring or even encouraging acts of prejudice, unfairness, bullying, and injustice when confronted with it; and/or student does not seek to collaborate with others to organize and carry out action against injustice; and/or student shows resistance when assigned an action-based project.
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Conclusion

I have long held the conviction that literature is a powerful tool for enacting change. The stories that we read and share shape the way that we think and feel about the world around us. The books that I encountered during my middle and high school careers informed a lot of who I am today, and I suspect that my English teachers over the years have impacted me more profoundly than I could ever know. When I decided to study English education, I knew that I wanted to one day empower my students to broaden their perspectives and question societal rules and meet others with open arms and kindness. I want to be a teacher like Ms. Hughes, who taught me how to share my stories and listen to others’, or Ms. Mary Kent Whitaker, who inspired her students to fight for their right to read. But how? What kind of teacher will I be? As I near the end of my undergraduate career, I am confronted with questions like these daily. The distant dream of teaching English to high schoolers one day has now become a reality. Finding the answers to these questions has become an urgent necessity.

I have come to realize that English teachers have the responsibility and the privilege of teaching their students about more than just literary devices and reading comprehension strategies. We get to teach about people, and culture, and justice, and the world. We get to write lessons that move our students to think for themselves and take action against injustices. We have the responsibility to use literature by and about people who are marginalized, to bring diverse perspectives into our classrooms, and to honor their stories. We have the responsibility to resist self-censorship and teach our students truthfully about the “nature and position of mankind,” as Ms. Whitaker so eloquently stated.

Literature study is unique because readers are empowered with the opportunity to learn about themselves and others simultaneously. When teachers give students the chance to see their lives and experiences reflected in stories about people who are different from them, the differences become fewer. When teachers employ multicultural literature and teach students about social justice, the curriculum becomes a window and mirror. That is when the receptacle of empathy that I believe we all possess gets used.

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