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Los Angeles

Education for Good Humans:

Teaching Early Elementary School Students About Social Justice

A dissertation submitted in partial

satisfaction of the requirements for

the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Shelby Marie Kretz

2023

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2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Education for Good Humans:

Teaching Early Elementary School Students About Social Justice

by

Shelby Marie Kretz

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Kimberley Gomez, Co-Chair

Professor Pedro Antonio Noguera, Co-Chair

With a change in access to information and a rising social and political consciousness for young people, elementary schools must start to think more about their role in shaping kids' understanding of social issues. While researchers certainly have not agreed upon a single definition of social justice education, Bell (2016) defines its aim as helping students "develop awareness, knowledge, and processes to examine issues of justice/injustice in their personal lives, communities, institutions, and the broader society" (p.4).

In this qualitative study, I interviewed 17 elementary school teachers who teach their students about social justice. The participants were current educators teaching Kindergarten through 2nd grade. I apply Dover's (2013) Dimensions of Teaching for Social Justice as the theoretical framework to guide our understanding of the results. While some research has been done on teaching for social justice, very little has been done at the elementary level, especially early elementary. This exploratory research demonstrates ways early elementary school teachers can think about implementing education about social justice in their classrooms, as well as the challenges faced in this work. The findings show the complex ways in which teachers address challenging topics of social justice while navigating the various social and political contexts of classroom and school environments. The results indicate that there are several challenges to teaching early elementary school students about issues of social justice, but having specific supports in place can eliminate or lessen those challenges. There are many reasons that teachers teach about social justice, and these reasons can be applied to help more teachers start bringing issues of social justice into the classroom. The goal of this dissertation is to demonstrate how and why some early elementary school teachers are teaching their students about social justice. I hope that other early elementary school teachers can see these examples and start to bring topics of social justice into their own classrooms.

The dissertation of Shelby Marie Kretz is approved.

Tyrone C. Howard

Jessica Christine Harris

Kimberley Gomez, Committee Co-Chair

Pedro Antonio Noguera, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

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VITA

Education

2016 - present	University of California, Los Angeles, Ph.D. in Education Division: Urban Schooling Expected 2023 **Dissertation Title:** *Education for Good Humans: Teaching Early Elementary School Students About Social Justice* **Dissertation Advisor:** Dr. Pedro Noguera
2009 - 2013	The Ohio State University, B.S. Major: Psychology Summa Cum Laude with Honors

Employment

August 2018 - *Present*	**Founder**, Little Justice Leaders *Social justice curriculum organization*
September 2021 - December 2023	**Teaching Fellow**, UCLA Undergraduate Education *Quarter in Washington Program*
July 2022 & July 2021	**Lead Instructor**, UCLA Summer Sessions *Introduction to Social Entrepreneurship*
March 2021 - June 2021	**Graduate Student Researcher**, UCLA Center for Labor Studies
January 2021 - March 2021	**Teaching Associate**, UCLA Department of Education *Introduction to Educational Issues and Scholarship*
September 2020 - December 2020	**Teaching Associate**, UCLA Department of Disability Studies and Department of Psychology *Current Perspectives on the Autism Spectrum and Neurodiversity*
March 2020 - June 2020	**Teaching Associate**, UCLA College of Life Sciences and Department of Psychology *Health Disparities*
September 2019 - December 2019	**Teaching Assistant**, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Department of Public Policy *Management in the 21st Century*
January 2019 -	**Teaching Assistant**, UCLA Graduate School of Education and

March 2019	Information Studies *Education, Equality, and the Future of American Society*
September 2018 - December 2018	**Teaching Assistant**, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Department of Public Policy *Management in the 21st Century*
September 2016 - June 2018	**Graduate Student Researcher**, UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

Public Service

January 2013 - June 2020	**Board Member, Co-Founder**, 1girl
May 2017 - October 2017	**Committee Member**, LAUSD Young Women's Leadership Conference
January 2017 - August 2017	**Elected Councilmember**, Westwood Neighborhood Council
January 2017 - August 2017	**Research Consultant**, Girls Build LA

Honors and Awards

2018	**UCLA Graduate Research Mentorship Fellowship** Awarded to work with Dr. Pedro Noguera on a study of youth transitioning out of the juvenile justice system and back into schooling.
2018	**UCLA Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Fellowship** Awarded to work with Dr. Kim Gomez on a study of identity development of young girls of color involved with the leadership program *Girls Build LA*.
2017	**UCLA Lawrence Erickson Memorial Fellowship** Awarded to students pursuing degrees in education and who have distinguished themselves as leaders in campus or community organizations

Conference Presentation

Kretz, S. (2017). Becoming creators: How girls of color conceptualize experiences of solving problems for their communities. Poster presented at the *GSE&IS Research & Inquiry Conference*, Los Angeles, CA.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Teaching is not simply about reading, or math, or art. Instead, it is also about who is heard, listened to, and read, who gets to count, and who can paint the picture. It's about who moves ahead and who gets left behind. In this sense, teaching is political work, and it has always been so."
(Nieto, 2006, p. 9)

Social Justice in Education

Students' access to information has transformed rapidly over the past two decades with the rise of the internet and social media. Students in the United States now have more access to information through the Internet and social media than ever before. Youth technology use has increased by 32% for kids ages two to five, and technology use has increased by 23% for young ages six to eleven since 1997 (Goode et al., 2020). Today, students are exposed to (both fake and real) news, events, political views, social issues, and more through the Internet and social media on a regular basis. At younger and younger ages, kids are taking in world news, political events, and social commentary.

With this change in access to information and a rising social and political consciousness for young people, schools must start to think about their role in shaping kids' understanding of social issues. This type of work has been grouped broadly under many terms in the academic literature, including the term "social justice education" (North, 2008; Dover, 2009; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; Dover, 2013). While researchers certainly have not agreed upon a single definition of social justice education, Bell (2016) defines its aim as helping students "develop awareness, knowledge, and processes to examine issues of justice/injustice in their personal lives, communities, institutions, and the broader society" (p.4). This definition, while not all-

encompassing, offers a high-level understanding of how most educators and researchers understand social justice education.

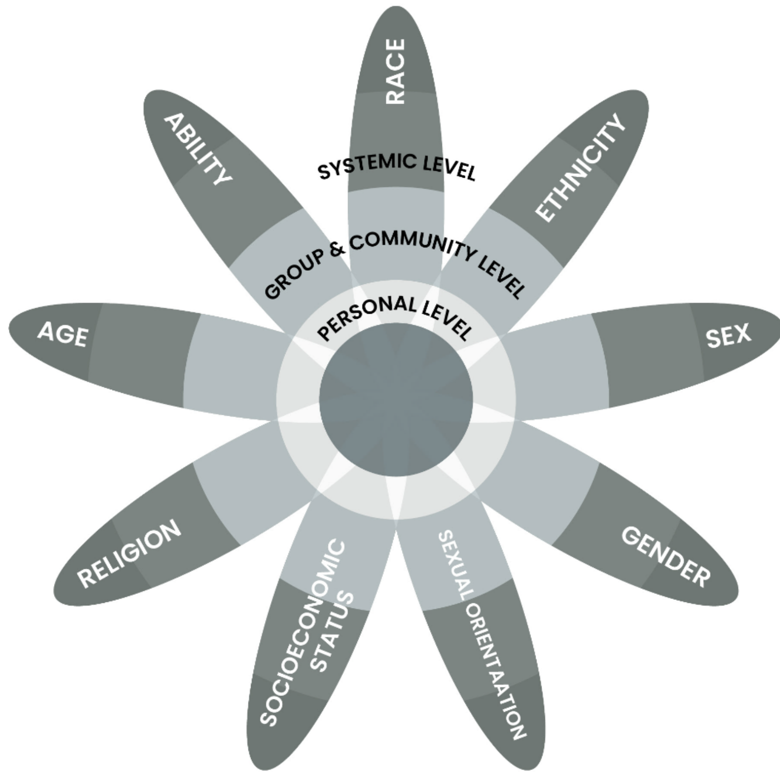
Teaching About Social Justice

There are various theories and frameworks for teaching from a standpoint of social justice, which will be reviewed in chapter two; however, the focus of this study is on teaching *about* social justice. Teaching about social justice is the actual act of teaching young people about issues of justice and injustice in the world around them. That includes teaching young people about societal challenges on topics ranging from racism to religious freedom, from homelessness to climate change, and more. Rather than just keeping in mind issues of social justice, as many teachers do when they try to represent their students' identities in books in their classrooms, for example, teaching about social justice means bringing explicit attention to topics related to social justice. So, rather than just having people of color represented in classroom books or media, a teacher who is teaching *about* social justice will teach their students about race and racism. Rather than just having a pride flag up in the classroom to indicate a safe space, a teacher who is teaching *about* social justice would teach students about LGBTQ+ families, identities, and struggles.

Review figure 1 for examples of the types of issues that are included with social justice education. Though it is not comprehensive, this figure demonstrates not only some of the social identities that teachers might teach their students about – such as race, gender, age, religion, and ability – but also the various levels with which students could learn. The first level is the personal level, which is where that identity characteristic impacts them on a personal level. For example, their gender may be male, female, nonbinary, or something else, and that would impact their personal experience of gender on a day-to-day basis. This first level would also include how

Figure 1

Matrix of Interlocking Systems and Levels of Oppression and Resistance (Adams, Varghese, & Zúñiga, *2023).*



personal biases and prejudice impact individuals. This one-to-one prejudice level of interaction is sometimes considered to be the definition and extent of racism or any other form of oppression, but the next two layers dig deeper into community and societal levels. Particularly for kids, the personal level is usually the easiest to understand. At the group and community level, students could learn about how various groups experience privilege or oppression based on their identity characteristics. For example, when it comes to sexual orientation, the group of people who identify as heterosexual broadly experience more privilege (in the area of sexual orientation) than do those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, students would examine the systematic level, which looks at the ways systems are designed to produce privilege or oppression for various groups depending on their identities. This area would consider cultural norms, and the ways in which dominant groups in society lead to unquestioned belief systems and ways of operating. Of course, this level is the most difficult

to grasp for both young people and adults, so teaching about social justice topics on the systemic level would require more complexity than teaching about it on the personal or group levels.

Just as importantly as the three levels, this figure demonstrates the connections between various identities with the “intersecting axes of race, gender, social class, and other social categories that operate at all three levels of social organization” (Adams & Zúñiga, 2016, p.111). The term “intersectional” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, and it refers to the ways different identity characteristics intersect to create an entirely different experience of an identity (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, Crenshaw (1989) focuses on the experience of Black women, as their multidimensional experiences as both Black and female were not fully supported or understood by looking through an either antiracist or a feminist lens. The intersecting identities of race and gender created a new identity. Others have applied this theory to identities such as being Indigenous and having a disability, which would be a distinctly different experience than being white in the United States with a disability, for example. This theory can be applied to all identity characteristics and represents a way of understanding identity as complex and interconnected.

Identity is one important aspect of justice, but there are other areas of social justice as well, such as environmental justice, and access to education, food, housing, and healthcare. All of these areas are topics that an educator who is teaching for social justice might teach their students about. As with topics of identity, these topics can be weaved into lessons on literacy, math, science, and history. They can be taught using books, media, lesson plans, and other classroom resources. They can be set up as thematic units, monthly themes, or in any other structure that seems appropriate for the educator and school community. Teaching *about* social justice means moving beyond just teaching with social justice in mind. Teaching with social

justice in mind often leads to important changes in practices and policies to make schools more equitable, or the increasing of diversity in texts and other media to demonstrate better representation of all students and cultures. For example, schools often re-evaluate their discipline policies to ensure that students of color are not being disproportionately disciplined in punitive ways or removing punitive discipline from the school environment completely. Other ways that schools might teach with social justice in mind would be to rethink homework policies, stop giving attendance awards, and stop or reduce the process of academic tracking. While changes like these are important to create an equitable learning environment, teaching *about* social justice takes it a step further by actually presenting the issues directly to the students as part of their curriculum.

Neutrality in Education

"Today, no serious curriculum scholar would advance the argument that schools in general and curriculum in particular are politically neutral."
(Pinar, 1995, p.244).

Every day, educators must make decisions about how and what to teach. They will decide – within the realm of the choices that their governments, districts, and schools give them – what texts to use, what topics to study, and what skills to emphasize. With each choice, they are deciding what identities to value in their classroom. With each choice, they decide which parts of history and culture matter, and which should be left out of the conversation. In many ways, they decide how the students in their classroom will see the world, whether they are aware of it or not. As Friere (1998) points out: "I must choose between one thing and another thing" (p.93). With each choice of what to teach, educators decide how the young people in front of them will start to perceive and make sense of the world around them. Even that which a teacher *doesn't* teach about indicates to some degree what they value and deem as important (Kelly & Brandes, 2001).

Each decision to teach about one thing is a decision, conscious or unconscious, to not use that time to teach about something else.

This impact exists at the policy level all the way down to the classroom level. Policymakers, education companies, school leaders, and teachers make these kinds of decisions every day. A textbook company will decide what should be included in a textbook, which will typically be based on a set of standards put out by the United States government. School leaders will make decisions about which textbooks to use, often based on their own preferences or state expectations. Teachers then make the decision of how to use that textbook, what to use from it, and whether or not to supplement it with other sources.

Schools are situated within the political and social realities of the world around them. Kelly & Brandes (2001) argue:

> …schools are not apart from the wider society; they are themselves sites of struggle and social change. Both inside and outside schools, society inequities (based on class, race, gender, or sexuality) place limits on the actual practice of democracy. Teachers alone cannot overcome the social injustices that currently impede democracy, but they can play an important role in nurturing a more active form of citizenship among young people (p.438).

Despite arguments in popular media that education should be 'neutral,' there has never been true neutrality in education (Pinar, 1995; Friere, 2000). Many argue that social justice has no place in schools, but all curriculum comes from somewhere. Much of our current curriculum is rooted in dominant narratives, which center "heterosexuality, cisgender identities, maleness, Christianity, whiteness, able-bodiedness, middle-and upper-class positions, documented status, the English language, the Global North, settlement, and colonialism, for example, as the norms or most important perspectives" (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022, p.4). Dominant narratives are the ones that are seen as 'normal', or those following the status quo of education. Counter narratives are those that go against the status quo, instead centering voices and stories of those who have

experienced oppression, or those who do not make up the dominant identity of a society (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022). By default, because of who holds power in society, most learning materials are created and overseen by those who hold dominant identities; therefore, those learning materials often center perspectives of those dominant identities.

Whether choosing to ground a classroom in dominant narratives, counter narratives, or a mix of both, an educator makes a choice about what worldviews matter enough to be taught. There is no opportunity to stay neutral as an educator. Personal, social, and political views come out through the lessons they teach, the texts they choose, and the policies they enact in their classrooms. In fact, teachers that claim to be politically neutral "are inherently authoritarian because their pedagogical choices act on students, but students are denied a structured opportunity to critique or act on their teachers' choices" (Bigelow, 2001, p.299). In other words, staying 'neutral' is also a choice, and that choice impacts students. Therefore, the decision isn't neutral at all. Whether seeking to stay neutral or not, a teacher cannot come into the classroom without their preconceived notions, beliefs, and understanding of the world entering that classroom with them. They cannot step into a classroom and forget who they are and what they believe to be true. In fact, teachers usually see their roles as partially teaching young people how and what to believe is true.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that social justice educators don't struggle with how to thoughtfully engage their students in social and political issues. Even with the argument that it is impossible to be neutral, there is no clear path for what a socially and politically aware education should look like. It also does not mean that teachers do or should assume that they are free to teach their students whatever they think. That would, in fact, not be a social justice education, but again an authoritarian and all-knowing teaching style that would directly

contradict the idea of a classroom focused on justice. This leaves educators who care about social justice to grapple with how to bring complex social and political topics into the classroom in a way that does not indoctrinate students' minds but rather fosters critical thinking and meaningful learning. Teachers for social justice must of course not only choose to teach about social justice, but they must think critically about *how* to teach about social justice. The fact that they cannot remain neutral does not suggest that they should freely allow their opinions, ideas, and politics to be the only or primary perspective taught in the classroom. For example, educator Bigelow (1997) reflected:

> On the one hand, I had no desire to feign neutrality - to hide my conviction that people here need to care about and to act in solidarity with workers around the world in their struggles for better lives. To pretend that I was a mere dispenser of information would be dishonest, but worse, it would imply that being a spectator is an ethical response to injustice. It would model a stance of moral apathy. I wanted students to know these issues were important to me, that I cared enough to do something about them. On the other hand, I never want my social concerns to suffocate student inquiry or to prevent students from thoughtfully considering opposing views (p.14).

All teachers must make decisions about what and how to teach, and these decisions can be difficult for several reasons. Social justice educators choose to center counter narratives that bring social and political issues into the classroom, but choosing not to teach these topics would also be a political choice.

Study Overview

In this exploratory study, I focus on kindergarten through second grade teachers who self-identify as teaching their students about social justice. The teachers' stories help to shed light on the challenges, the supports, and the processes involved with teaching social justice to early elementary school students.

Social justice in education has been called by many different names and defined in various ways in practice and research. For the purposes of this study, I am defining teaching for social justice as the explicit teaching *about* concepts of social justice to kids. Topics of social justice include, but are not limited to: race and racism, gender identity, feminism, LGBTQ+ identities, age, immigration, refugee experiences, educational equity, food justice, homelessness, bodily autonomy and consent, environmental sustainability, body neutrality and positivity, disability, religious diversity, and activism.

All the teachers in this study teach *about* different topics of social justice in their classroom throughout the school year. The participants are early elementary school teachers who are teaching about social justice to their K-2nd grade students. They self-identify as teaching about social justice.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

For K-2nd grade teachers who are teaching about topics of social justice:

- What is the meaning and purpose of teaching about social justice?
- How are they teaching about social justice topics in their classrooms?
- What are the challenges and supports these teachers experience in teaching about social justice topics?

Study Contributions and Gaps in the Literature

"No one has ever explained why children are so full of questions outside of school…, and the conspicuous absence of display of curiosity about the subject matter of school lessons."
(Dewey, 2012, p.167)

The literature that exists on social justice education tends to focus more on multicultural education, critical education, and other forms of teaching *for* justice, rather than teaching *about* social justice. These other forms of social justice education are expanded upon in the literature review section of this dissertation. Much education research focuses on ways that teachers integrate a lens of social justice to create more equitable learning spaces (Darling-Hammond et al, 2002; Francois & Quartz, 2021), though not necessarily how they are explicitly presenting those issues of social justice to their students. While most teachers who teach *about* social justice are also implementing elements of teaching *for* social justice, the same is not true in reverse. Teaching for social justice is about creating more equitable spaces for all kids, but it doesn't require teaching kids about justice and injustice. Many teachers who are trying to create an equitable classroom environment are not explicitly teaching their students about topics like racism, gender identity, or climate change.

In this study, I looked at the ways that teachers bring issues of social justice to their students, regardless of their students' identities. In the social justice education literature, there is a plethora of research on teaching students about their own identities, such as bringing lessons about immigration to a class of primarily immigrant students (Narez, 2002). While that work is undoubtedly important for the sake of representation, in this study, I'll be looking at the ways educators bring social justice issues – such as race, gender identity, sexuality, immigration, culture, religion – to students who may or may not identify with marginalized groups in those contexts. This is an important distinction, as teaching students who hold privilege in an area, such as white kids when it comes to race, is often a different experience than teaching Black kids about race, for example. Teaching a classroom that is mixed when it comes to race is also a different experience for teachers. Understanding how teachers bring multiple issues of justice

will also demonstrate how it impacts students to learn about identities where they hold privilege and identities where they do not. For example, a teacher may teach about racism to a class of primarily Black students, and those students may see themselves and their experiences represented in that lesson. Later in the year, the same teacher might teach about disabilities, and the same students who don't have disabilities may see themselves as holding privilege in that area, which is a very different learning experience.

Most of the research related to social justice education is focused at the secondary and even the higher education levels. While students at older ages will certainly have the tools to more critically and thoughtfully analyze issues of justice, learning about justice at younger ages can set the stage for a deeper understanding and more meaningful connection to justice as kids progress throughout their education. Many people have heard a story of a young person who stumbled upon issues of social justice in their late teens and early twenties, often in college, only to finally have their eyes opened to the issues of injustice in the world at that point in their lives. This often happens with white college students who "awaken" to the existence of racism for the first time. Not only can this be an emotionally taxing experience for those students, it can also lead to problematic but well-intended actions, such as taking mission trips to African countries as a way to "give back." Alternatively, if young kids could grow up with an awareness and understanding of social justice, they would be better prepared to recognize injustice in the world around them when they see it and tackle issues of justice in meaningful and non-harmful ways.

Learning about social justice at a young age also allows a student to develop a deeper understanding of it over time, and learning can be scaffolded over a series of years in ways that are developmentally appropriate for their age. There are few empirical studies that look at social justice education at the elementary school level, and especially at the early elementary school

level. This area may offer some of the greatest promise for developing thoughtful, socially aware young people who can critically examine the world around them. Plus, research is clear that kids are developing racial and gender biases before they're even reaching Kindergarten. (Perszyk et al., 2019). It is important to counteract these biases as soon as possible.

In this study, we interviewed educators who teach Kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students. This research demonstrates how these complex issues can be taught in very early grades to reduce further development of stereotypes and lay the groundwork for deeper critical analysis later in their educational journeys.

Much of the existing literature includes first-hand accounts of individual teachers or case studies of individual teachers. These accounts are stories of their classes, experiences, or even individual lessons that they have implemented (Narez, 2002; Blum, 2004; Baker, 2011; Allee-Herndon et. al., 2021; Sibbett, 2022). Most of these accounts are of older students, but some focus on elementary school classrooms as well, such as the collection of accounts in *Rethinking Elementary Education* (Barbian et al., 2012). While these stories offer insight into the experiences of educators, they aren't able to offer much other than narrative lessons for what works when it comes to social justice education. Unfortunately, since social justice is such a complex topic, a single narrative can provide some lessons but likely won't be applicable to teachers in different contexts. In this study, I interviewed teachers from a variety of backgrounds and in various contexts to start to develop some patterns and themes that stay consistent for many educators who are doing this work.

Another area of the literature that has been more extensively researched is social justice in teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 2009; Dyches & Boyd, 2017; Francois & Quartz, 2021). This research is useful for considering how to educate pre-service teachers, but it offers little

support for current teachers. It also may sometimes miss some of the nuance of actual classroom experience. Educating pre-service teachers on how to teach for social justice will give them the basics to launch a career as a social justice educator, but it does not necessarily equip them with the knowledge and skills of *how* to respond in the moment to challenges and situations that come up. When teaching about social justice, most teachers will attest that planning is different than implementing with kids in the classroom. Many of these studies also focus on teaching *for* social justice rather than teaching *about* social justice. No study that I know of has looked at multiple active educators' experiences with teaching about social justice at the early elementary school level.

In this dissertation, I seek to forefront the voices of educators who are currently working with early elementary school students in our schools each and every day. These voices will expose the ways that teachers can bring, and already are bringing, issues of justice to some of our youngest learners in schools across the United States. The results of this study will be theoretical yet practical, as educators need practical strategies for bringing this work to life. Howard and Rodriguez-Minkoff (2017) argue that "while the theoretical tenets of CRP [Culturally Relevant Pedagogy] have been growing in the literature for over two decades, concrete examples of what it looks like in practice remain a pressing need" (p.8). While Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is distinct from education for social justice, the same challenge applies to many educational approaches and pedagogies that seek to center identity, culture, and justice. There is a pressing need for concrete examples of how this work is being done in practice, particularly at the younger age ranges.

Educators approaching issues of social justice undoubtedly face many challenges, though some of them are not yet documented in the literature. These challenges include family

pushback, lack of administrative support, lack of time to cover additional topics, difficulty breaking down topics in age-appropriate ways, facilitating controversial conversations with six-year-olds, and more. The teachers in this study faced all of those challenges and more. This study demonstrates how these challenges impact educators and their ability to teach about issues of social justice. It also demonstrates how teachers make decisions about, plan for, and carry out social justice lessons with early elementary school students. I look at how educators work through the challenges, lean on their support systems (when they have them), and engage in the work of teaching their students about important social issues. Understanding their experiences will help other educators bring social justice education to their classrooms to raise young people with social consciousness, critical thinking skills, and concern for major social issues facing the world today.

Why Care?

"If we neglect to include an activist component in our curricula, we cut students off from the possibility of social change. We model apathy as a response to the world's problems" (Peterson, 2012, p. 56).

Social justice education has been under attack in the United States in recent years. This was in part due to a major public backlash from the misconception that teachers were teaching students about Critical Race Theory in K-12 schools (Morgan, 2022). According to an analysis conducted by Education Week (2022), 42 states have introduced bills or other measures that would limit or ban the ways that teachers can talk about race, racism, or sexism in the classroom. As of May 2022, 17 states have actually imposed these bans (Schwartz, 2022). That means that in at least 17 states, teachers who bring up issues of race, racism, or sexism in the classroom may be at risk for losing their jobs. In early 2022, Florida advanced what critics called the "Don't Say Gay" bill, which bans talking about sexual orientation or gender identity in K-3rd grade

classrooms (Diaz, 2022). In 2023, that bill was expanded to all public school students across K-12th grade (Burga, 2023). Florida isn't the only state limiting how teachers can address LGBTQ+ issues. At least 15 states in total have proposed laws that would "affect ways of discussing, addressing, or interacting with LGBTQ youth in schools" (Sawchuk, 2022). Again, this means teachers in those states have to carefully consider how, or if, to bring LGBTQ+ lessons and identities into the classroom for fear of losing their jobs.

These laws are concerning for a number of reasons, including that students' identities are not being valued and in fact are being erased in the classroom. This could be their own identity, as an LGBTQ+ student, a student of color, or any other identity that is being erased from classroom conversations and lessons, or it could be their families' identities, if they live in a household with two moms or two dads, for example. Every young person deserves to learn in a classroom where they feel seen, heard, and appreciated for who they are, and every student deserves to feel like their family is valid. With 114,000 estimated LGBTQ+ students in the state of Florida alone (Burga, 2023), the impact on students not seeing their identities represented in the classroom is massive.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I faced a long and difficult process of accepting my identity. Growing up in Ohio, I saw no representation of LGBTQ+ identities at home or at school. Nobody ever told me that it was okay to be gay, or even that gay people existed. I did not see a single example of a same-sex family in the picture books, the chapter books, or the literature I read anytime from elementary school through high school. While certainly today some young people are exposed to more diversity in family structures through media and at home, many young people across the country still are not seeing that representation much if ever in their lives. This is especially true in more conservative regions of the United

States. If schools aren't teaching it for them, nobody is. I want every child to feel validated, seen, and appreciated for who they are, whether they are female, queer, Black, or any other identities that are being silenced by these classroom laws. I want every child with a different family structure – whether that means having two dads, two moms, or any other combination of endless possibilities – to feel like their family is valued and represented in the classroom.

The laws and bans against social justice education are also concerning because they are limiting the exposure that young people have to difference and diversity. Even if a student feels fully represented in the classroom, they may not be exposed to different identities or life experiences that would enrich their educational experience, critical thinking, and ability to make sense of the world around them. By removing these identities from classroom conversations, we're teaching students that being different is wrong and taboo. We are at best ignoring, and at worst reinforcing, bias and stereotypes.

I personally also experienced a lack of exposure to and understanding of diversity as a young person growing up in Ohio. While we had some level of racial diversity at the schools I attended, I never learned explicitly about race, racism, oppression, or privilege. I was never taught to understand my whiteness in the context of a wider society that was and is steeped in racism. My whiteness was made to be invisible - an identity I knew I held, but nobody, including myself, ever acknowledged. My culture, customs, and views of the world that I learned from my Midwestern white family were consistently reinforced as 'normal' at school, and I was rarely taught that there were other ways of experiencing the world. Whiteness and white culture were the base from which all my learning happened.

I also never learned about how being able-bodied, middle class, English speaking, and a United States citizen impacted my life. I rarely saw examples of those who had different life

experiences, and therefore I couldn't make sense of my place in the world from an honest perspective. At some point, I learned that being female impacted the way I was treated compared to my male peers, but I didn't have much depth of understanding to truly evaluate or speak about that because I was never taught about it. I didn't have the skills to recognize, appreciate, and value diversity because it was so rarely talked about by the adults in my life. Still, I don't blame any of the adults in my life for my ignorance. I know they were doing the best they could with what they knew.

I had my first (and only) Black teacher in my K-12 education when I was a freshman in high school, and I never once considered that it shouldn't be that way, nor did I consider the impact that lack of diversity may have had on my Black peers. I never once was exposed to stories of Native and Indigenous people, as I celebrated Thanksgiving and was told only the whitewashed stories that come with it. Certainly it could be argued that I could have taken the initiative to learn about these things on my own, but in an age before regular use of the Internet and social media, these were not topics that were easily stumbled upon by middle-class white Midwestern teenagers.

Finally, in my senior year of high school, I had one teacher who cared about social justice. She began to teach us about privilege and oppression, though she eventually had to tone it down because there were threats that she would be fired. It wasn't until college again that I learned, and finally began to understand, more about issues of social justice. As someone who cares deeply about justice today, I regret the years that I lived unaware of the white, middle-class privilege I hold. I regret not understanding the ways being female would impact me throughout my life, and I regret that I didn't embrace my identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and come out sooner in life. Social justice education could have made a huge impact for me on a

personal level, and that impact should not be diminished. That being said, learning about social justice would have also helped me intellectually, as I would have developed deeper critical thinking skills and a stronger understanding of the complex issues that exist in our society. In every way, my life and schooling could have been made richer and deeper by learning about social justice at any point in my K-12 education, especially if it had happened early on.

In part because of these experiences, I created a social justice education organization called Little Justice Leaders. Little Justice Leaders creates education resources for educators to teach elementary school students about topics of social justice. It was my interest in this topic that pushed me to both create Little Justice Leaders and to pursue this particular research. Because of my work with Little Justice Leaders, I took caution with this study to eliminate any potential conflicts of interest. I did not speak to participants about Little Justice Leaders, and if they brought it up as a resource they used in their classroom, I did not further ask about that resource in particular. The majority of participants were not aware of my position as leading a social justice education organization. I also ensured that my research questions would not provide any justification for the existence or growth of the organization. Both Little Justice Leaders and this research rely on the assumption that social justice should be taught to students in schools. Therefore, this research does not provide justification for the existence of social justice education organizations. This research focuses on how social justice teaching is already being done and how other teachers can do the same. However, to maintain neutrality, this dissertation intentionally does not encourage or even mention the use of Little Justice Leaders as a resource for teaching about social justice. On the contrary, I seek to demonstrate how any teacher, with or without such supporting resources, can bring social justice topics into their early elementary school classrooms.

Research has shown that bringing these issues to the classroom are beneficial for students in a variety of ways. A report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2002) claimed:

> When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school. Conversations, however, should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives. Teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so. (p.6)

While some research has been done on teaching for social justice, very little has been done at the elementary level, especially early elementary. Critics argue that early elementary is too young to learn about issues of justice (Kelly & Brooks, 2009; Weseley & Thenoux, 2021), but research demonstrates that children as young as four years old exhibit racial and gender biases (Perszyk et al., 2019). These biases have the potential to get even stronger and deeper over time if they aren't interrupted at a young age.

Teaching about social justice is needed at the elementary school level, and it's important to understand how the teachers who are already implementing this work are approaching it. While I argue that social justice should be brought into the early elementary school classroom, it's also important that the work is done thoughtfully. The stories of the teachers in this study demonstrate how other elementary school teachers could think about implementing education for social justice in their classrooms.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, I have provided a brief overview of social justice education, the current political climate of social justice education, and the purpose of teaching about social justice. I have framed my role in this work and provided a roadmap for the goals of this dissertation.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature and theoretical frameworks that guide this research. In Chapter 3, I outline the qualitative methods that will be used to conduct this study. Chapter 4 outlines the findings from the study, and Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

"A variety of approaches have been proposed to deal with controversial elements in curriculum. Some support neutrality whereby the subject matter would be politically neutral (but by whose *standards?)" (Egéa-Kuehne, 1996, p.155).*

What is Social Justice Education?

Researchers have struggled to find a common definition for social justice education. In fact, some have suggested that social justice in education has become a catchphrase for "anything and everything" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 627). For the sake of this research, I am focusing on teachers who teach *about* issues of social justice, such as race, gender, socioeconomic identity, disability, and environmental sustainability. Bell (2016) offers a useful definition of social justice education, which frames our thinking about what social justice education actually means:

> The goal of social justice education is to enable individuals to develop critical analytical tools necessary to understand the structural features of oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems. Social justice education aims to help participants develop awareness, knowledge, and processes to examine issues of justice/injustice in their personal lives, communities, institutions, and the broader society. It also aims to connect analysis to action; to help participants develop a sense of agency and commitment, as well as skills and tools, for working with others to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p.4)

This definition encompasses a number of different philosophies and approaches to social justice education, and it reflects my view of the meaning of social justice education. It also focuses on teaching *about* issues of justice. It focuses on giving them the skills to recognize justice and injustice in society by looking at social justice issues.

The topics of pedagogy and curriculum come up often throughout the study of educational approaches to teaching for justice, and they sometimes distinguish the difference

between approaches. In this study, we're looking primarily at curriculum, as we're focused on teachers teaching *about* social justice, and therefore specifically focusing more on what they are teaching than how they are teaching it. That being said, it's difficult to tease out the distinction between pedagogy and curriculum when educators are centered on justice, as it comes through their practice. Pedagogy also plays a role in the curriculum and how it is brought to the students, so the two will be intertwined. Social justice education draws from a number of theoretical, political, societal, conceptual, and pedagogical philosophies. I will outline some of these philosophies to demonstrate the vast array of literature from which social justice education draws.

Critical Pedagogy / Liberating Pedagogies

The concept of critical pedagogy originated in Paulo Friere's work, which he also deemed 'problem-posing' education (Friere, 2000). This form of education has roots in critical theory, which had roots in the social and political theories of Hegel and Marx (Torres, 1999). Critical pedagogy is focused on fostering critical thinking skills to empower oppressed groups to understand and transform their own realities. This is posed in contrast to what Friere (2000) refers to as the banking concept of education. In the banking model of education, teachers deposit knowledge into the students, much the way funds are deposited into an empty bank account. This assumes the students come with no pre-existing knowledge, skills, or understanding of the world around them. In banking education, students are seen as empty receptacles and educators are the experts, filling them with information and facts that should not be questioned. In problem-posing education, on the other hand, students co-construct knowledge with the teacher, and an emphasis is placed on taking a critical view of society and systems of inequality. This critical view forms the basis of critical pedagogy, a way of teaching that

encourages young people to question social and political norms, values, and traditions (Friere, 2000).

Friere (1998) posits that one of the most important aspects of critical education is to allow students to view themselves as "social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias, capable of being angry because of a capacity to love" (p.45). Much like social justice education, critical pedagogy links education to real-world issues that young people care about, such as racism and discrimination. In this way, critical pedagogy gives learners the chance to make sense of themselves in the context of the real world and the challenges faced by the real world (Friere, 1998).

Both social justice and critical frameworks center student experiences and knowledge, and both assume that young people are capable of thoughtfully examining existing systems of power and oppression (Friere, 2000). The frameworks diverge in that critical pedagogy focuses on oppressed groups examining their own oppression, whereas education for social justice focuses on teaching all students, of all backgrounds, to critically evaluate social and political structures of all types.

Democratic / Citizenship Education

Democratic education centers on providing students with a learning space that helps them discover and foster their own individual identity, passions, and personal standards. At the same time, democratic education enhances their sense of commitment to the greater society (Meier & Gasoi, 2017). As one of the core tenets of democratic education is to produce engaged citizens, democratic education and citizenship education are often used interchangeably (Torres, 1999). This form of education became popularized with John Dewey's thinking on education and democracy. His view was that education should exist to help create a society built on shared

communication, individual search for meaning, and collective pursuit of a functioning society (Dewey, 2012).

In Dewey's definition and thinking about democracy, it is characterized not only as a functioning government, but as a way of living and creating the world together as a society. A democratic person helps to shape and allows themselves to be shaped by society and democracy (Dewey, 2012). Democratic education has thus been seen as a means for creating young people who are committed to engaging with their democratic society as citizens. This educational approach requires three main areas of focus: to provide students knowledge about democracy; to give students the skills to engage with democracy; and to help students develop the dispositions and values needed for effective involvement in a democratic society (Biesta, 2007).

Democratic education offers similarities to social justice education, such as the focus on solving real-world problems, engaging with issues that impact the community, and creating a better world for everyone (Dewey, 2012). However, Torres (1999) argues that it falls short on truly transforming the functioning of society to make it more just for oppressed groups of people. On the other hand, Sherrod (2006) argues that a concern for social justice is simply part of being a good citizen, and therefore democratic education must include social justice. While I would agree that justice is part of good citizenship, the framework of democratic education certainly does not require the teaching for or about social justice. This is the point at which democratic education would need to be merged with other types of education in order to fully commit to a lens of social justice.

Culturally Relevant / Culturally Responsive / Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Called by multiple names, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is similar to critical pedagogy in its commitment to empowerment, but it focuses more on the collective than the

individual (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Ladson-Billings (1995) defines CRP as having three criteria: academic success for students, cultural competence for students, and critical consciousness through which students learn to challenge the social order. Howard (2010) outlines CRP this way:

> Culturally responsive pedagogy is situated in a framework that recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that students from diverse groups bring to schools, and seeks to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing student academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well being. (p.67-68)

By drawing on the uniqueness of student culture, CRP was designed to make learning more inclusive, effective, and relevant (Gay, 2000). It offers two main areas to focus on: pedagogical and curricular, which can be further broken down to three categories: content, techniques, and caring (Gay, 2014). On the side of pedagogy, it informs how teachers engage with students and how they teach academic subjects. On the side of curriculum, it involves teaching about the cultures and experiences of racially and ethnically diverse groups of people. The pedagogy and curriculum pieces together inform both the how and the what of teaching. In the case of CRP, the curricular side of the equation is focused on "ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity" (Gay, 2014, p.362). While this is vital for a classroom centered on justice, it represents just a piece of the curriculum that would be required to cover all issues of social justice. Education based on social justice would extend to other identities, including gender identity, disability status, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, language, and more. While a skilled and committed practitioner of CRP is likely to use this kind of intersectional approach, it is not inherent in all culturally relevant approaches.

Culturally relevant educators also do not necessarily teach explicitly *about* topics of justice and injustice. Ladson-Billings (2008) claims, "I can typically convince teachers…that it is

important to focus on learning as well as make use of students' culture. However, the idea that developing sociopolicial consciousness is important is a much harder sell" (p. 171). This represents one difference between teaching for social justice and using CRP. With CRP, most (though certainly not all) teachers can be convinced that using students' cultures is important, though of course this doesn't necessarily mean that they are able to do so effectively. When it comes to teaching about issues of justice, thus developing sociopolitical awareness, more teachers are opposed or at least uncertain about it (Ladson-Billings, 2008). Developing this kind of sociopolitical awareness is the focus of teaching about social justice.

Multicultural Education

Much like many social justice education concepts, the phrase "multicultural education" has been used for decades to describe a wide variety of educational initiatives and approaches. In a review of the literature, the only constant across the literature was that it was education designed to benefit people of color (Sleeter & Grant, 1987). More recently, there still have been many different proposed definitions of the term multicultural education, and few agree on exactly what it means (Özturgut, 2011). Özturgut (2011) presents a framework that includes seeking to understand not only other cultures, but to have a deep self-awareness, reflection, and understanding of our own self, biases, assumptions and prejudices.

However, some approaches to multicultural education, or what could be labeled diversity education, does not dive deep into issues of justice and injustice. Adams and Zúñiga (2016) suggest that whereas diversity education might teach young people the cultural differences between identity groups, it would not necessarily cover historical oppression, current day inequity, or pervasive discrimination faced by various groups. While multicultural education

represents a celebration of different cultures, it does not require a critical viewpoint of inequality (Adams & Zúñiga, 2016).

That being said, some scholars and educators of course do push multicultural education to be critical, and some even argue that it must be critical. McGee Banks and Banks (1995) have outlined five dimensions of multicultural education that are necessary: “content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure” (p.152). These dimensions demonstrate the complexity of any one given framework, and the ways in which it must also lean on other conceptualizations of social justice education approaches.

Putting It All Together

These are certainly not the only pedagogies, theories, and frameworks that align with teaching about and for social justice. Frameworks from both popular media and academic literature are constantly being developed and theorized. For example, abolitionist teaching is a framework for educators who are working to abolish the education system in the way that it functions now. This framework views education reform as not enough to reach true justice. Abolitionist education is “not a teaching approach: It is a way of life, a way of seeing the world, and a way of taking action against injustice” (Love, 2019, p. 88). This is an entire teaching philosophy.

Other social justice-related approaches include (but are not limited to) Feminist Pedagogy (Weiler, 1991), Equity Pedagogy (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995), Community Teaching (Murrell, 2001), Transformative Pedagogy (Ukpokodu, 2009), Reality Pedagogy (Emdin, 2016), Woke Pedagogy (Caldera, 2018), Textured Teaching (Germán, 2021), Solutionary Education (Weil, 2021), and Anti-Bias/Anti-Racist (ABAR) education (Kleinrock, 2021). These

frameworks (and more) bring even more nuance to the conversation about what constitutes teaching for social justice, and their existence highlights the movement towards an education system that is committed to seeking justice.

These theories overlap, intersect, and diverge in important ways. For example, Sibbett (2022) points out:

> Education that is 'democratic' (that includes a range of warranted perspectives) can seem to come into conflict with education that is 'critical' (that elevates and centers marginalized perspectives). We have little research depicting how educators meet such challenges (p.35).

Understanding the literature on education for social justice is made all the more complex because these various approaches to critical, multicultural, and justice-based education are so often used interchangeably. Similarly, sometimes one phrase like "social justice" or "culturally relevant" will be used as a catch-all phrase for anything related to social identities and pedagogy. For example, Darling-Hammond, French, and Garcia-Lopez (2002)'s book entitled "Learning to Teach for Social Justice" focuses more on identity and diversity – what I might otherwise refer to as culturally relevant pedagogy – and less on approaching issues of social justice in society the way I define it in this dissertation. Due to the lack of formally accepted definitions, these nuances can be extremely difficult to tease out.

These nuances are important, but for the sake of this research, it is simply worth noting that there are not yet clear and defined definitions or boundaries between the various approaches in this field of work. All of these different types of education are unique in their approaches – some focus on critical thinking, while others center on diversity, and still others focus on community action – but they all share the common thread that they seek to transform the way we think about education to be more inclusive, diverse, and rooted in justice. I am more concerned

with the ways educators are able to take these concepts, which have been highly theorized, and put them into action in their classrooms.

Gay (1995) pointed to a gap between theory and practice when it comes to multicultural education, noting that its "theoretical development is far out-stripping its practical development" (p. 4). It appears that not much has changed in the nearly three decades since that article urged for a more practical approach to justice education, as researchers are still seeking to close the theory-practice gap in social justice education (Kavanagh, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

To frame this research, I use Dover (2013)'s *Dimensions of Teaching for Social Justice*. While social justice education clearly draws from a number of fields and philosophies, Dover (2013) posits that "published accounts of teaching for social justice draw most heavily from five conceptual and pedagogical philosophies" (p. 3). This framework is derived from teacher practice and represents several overlapping conceptual and pedagogical foundations for this work. These five foundations are: democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, culturally responsive education, and social justice education (Dover, 2013). See Figure 2 for how these frameworks come together to create a single way of thinking about social justice education (Dover, 2009). All of these approaches together create a more complete and robust understanding of teaching for social justice.

Figure 2

Conceptual and Pedagogical Foundations of Teaching for Social Justice (Dover, 2009).

In this study, I will look for the ways these five philosophies show up and connect to create a framework for what it means to be a teacher that teaches about social justice in an early elementary school classroom. I will do this with a focus on how the teacher teaches *about* social justice. That is, educators teaching students *about* the social, historical, cultural, and political movements towards a more just and equitable society, rather than teaching with those concepts in mind. This is the center of the framework (Dover, 2009).

Chapter 3: Methodology

"…my students were critical theorists. They questioned, discussed, wrote about, and protested instances of oppression and inequity. They openly used Spanish and African American English in the classroom, asked if their lesbian parents would go to Hell, wrote about their fathers in jail, described how their languages were made fun of, and resisted anti-immigrant talk. Usually, these topics are unacceptable or at least uncomfortable for many elementary school teachers."
(Baker, 2011, p.43)

Methods Overview

In this study, I worked with 17 elementary school teachers who self-described as teaching their students about social justice. The participants were current educators teaching Kindergarten through 2nd grade, and they have been teaching elementary school for at least two school years. They self-identify as teaching their students about social justice topics. Participants were recruited through word of mouth and social media posts from social justice organizations through which I had connections. I also used snowball sampling by asking participants to recommend other teachers for the study.

For each of the participants, I conducted an in-depth interview to better understand their experiences with social justice education. Each of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. In addition, each participant was asked to submit educational material samples to show examples of how their social justice education plays out in the classroom.

Participants

Participants were recruited through social justice education organizations, social media, and our connections in education. The inclusion criteria for participants was that they must:

- Be current Kindergarten through 2nd grade educator;
- Have been teaching elementary school for at least two full academic years;
- Self-identify as teaching their students about social justice.

There were 17 teachers who took part in the study. Having 17 participants allowed us to maintain the individuality of each of their work and see their unique context while being able to recognize common threads throughout all of their experiences. This number of participants allowed for an analysis of each individual experience while also looking for a range of methods and patterns across the group.

All of the participants who entered the study identified as female. This is not surprising given that most elementary school educators are female, but it was not intentional. Table 1 outlines additional important demographic and school information that provides more context for each of the participants:

Table 1

Participant Demographic and School Information

Name	Race	Years teaching	Current grade level	Current school type	Current location (city, state)
Jolene	White	7	1st	Public charter school	La Mesa, California
Tessa	White	10	1st	Public charter school	Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Mary	Mixed / Afro Brazilian and Indigenous / Ashkenazi Jew	6	2nd	Public pilot school	Los Angeles, California
Sasha	Black	8	1st	Public pilot school	Los Angeles, California
Penny	White	14	Pre K-5th	Traditional public school	Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Taylor	White	7	1st	Private independent school	Los Angeles, California
Virginia	White	9	2nd	Traditional public	East Bridgewater,

				school	Massachusetts
Jade	Black / African American	13	1st	Private independent school	San Antonio, Texas
Luciana	Mexican-American	3	1st	Traditional public school	Los Angeles, California
Ruby	White	6	2nd	Private independent school	Los Angeles, California
Madonna	White	25	2nd	Private independent school	Miami, Florida
Sky	Black	11	K	Private independent school	North Hollywood, California
Rey	White	9	1st	Public magnet school	Los Angeles, California
Maya	White	11	1st	Public charter school	Detroit, Michigan
Samantha	White	8	1st	Traditional public school	Madison, Wisconsin
Juliet	White	23	2nd	Traditional public school	Richfield, Minnesota
Saoirse	White	7	K	Private independent school	San Antonio, Texas

This demographic information provides insight into each participant's viewpoint. We intentionally recruited teachers with a breadth of experience in terms of school type, location, and number of years teaching to allow for a more wide-ranged view of the experiences of social justice elementary educators. These differences also provide insight into the ways that different contexts matter when it comes to teaching about social justice.

Data Collection

Interviews

I conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the 17 participants. I used a modified version of Seidman's (2013) in-depth phenomenological interviewing, in which researchers conduct three interviews to: (1) outline the participant's experience, (2) delve into the details and context, and (3) allow participants to reflect and make meaning of their experience. I covered all three of the areas in one interview as the study was focused more on understanding what the teachers have done rather than delving into their reflections and meaning-making of their experiences. While the interviews encouraged teachers to reflect on the purpose of their work, the central purpose of the interview was to understand the basic framework of what social justice education efforts the teacher has made and why. We focused more on the tactics and practicalities than the theory. The interviews lasted approximately an hour each, though some went more than an hour and a half. The semi-structured interview protocol that I used can be found in Appendix A. The interviews included three sections, though they flowed naturally as semi-structured interviews, and did not necessarily result in three distinct sections of the conversation. The three broad sections of each interview included:

- **Section 1:** *Focused educator history* - In this part of the interview, participants were asked about their history as educators, including how long and where they've taught, in what contexts, and in what ways they have included social justice in their teaching. They were also asked about their own experiences with social justice and motivations for teaching social justice. They were asked what drew them to the teaching profession. The goal of this section was to understand the context for this educator's experience as a teacher and as a teacher for social justice.

- **Section 2:** *Details of Experience* - In this section of the interview, the teachers were asked specifically about their experience with teaching social justice to early elementary school students. This section went into depth about their teaching methods, the challenges they face, and the support they have with bringing social justice to elementary school students. In this section, they told stories of how they have brought social justice into the classroom in successful and unsuccessful ways. They shared about the challenges they have faced in teaching social justice and how they have dealt with those challenges. They shared about how they approach thinking about social justice and how they make the lessons developmentally appropriate.
- **Section 3:** *Reflection on Meaning* - The final section of the interview focused on the teacher's own reflection on their experiences teaching social justice. The educators shared their thoughts about the meaning they made of social justice education for elementary school students. While this section was shorter than the *Details of Experience* section, it provided good context for understanding why the teacher was doing this work and how they think about the work. In this section, teachers shared about their morals, goals, teaching moments, and life events that shaped who they became as social justice educators.

Taken together, these three sections provide a more holistic picture of how the teacher came to become a social justice educator, how they do it on a day to day basis, and how they make sense of their role as a teacher for social justice. The semi-structured interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. The protocol outlines the broad general questions that were asked, though the conversation often flowed and did not exactly follow the specific questions on the protocol.

Educational Material Samples

In addition to interviews, I also asked educators to submit at least three educational materials that demonstrate their teaching of social justice, though many of the teachers submitted more than three. One teacher did not submit any. These materials could be lesson plans, student work, class presentations, worksheets, classroom photos, or any other format that they found useful to demonstrate their educational methods and approaches.

The educational material samples allowed the participants to demonstrate their experience with teaching social justice through work they have produced as social justice educators. It gives us another opportunity for understanding the complicated challenges and opportunities that go into social justice education at the elementary school level. It also gave concrete examples of how the work was being done in each of their classrooms, as well as what resources they were drawing on to create curriculum and lesson plans. As the interviews were semi-structured, in some cases the educational materials served as guiding conversation prompts for the interviews. The lesson plans provide a tangible demonstration of their verbal explanations of their work. It also gave them specific, concrete examples to point to when expressing complex topics. And finally, the lesson samples provided insight into the ways in which teachers are actually implementing the work in the classroom.

Saoirse is the one participant who did not submit sample materials. Here is an overview of what each of the participants submitted as their educational material samples:

Jolene

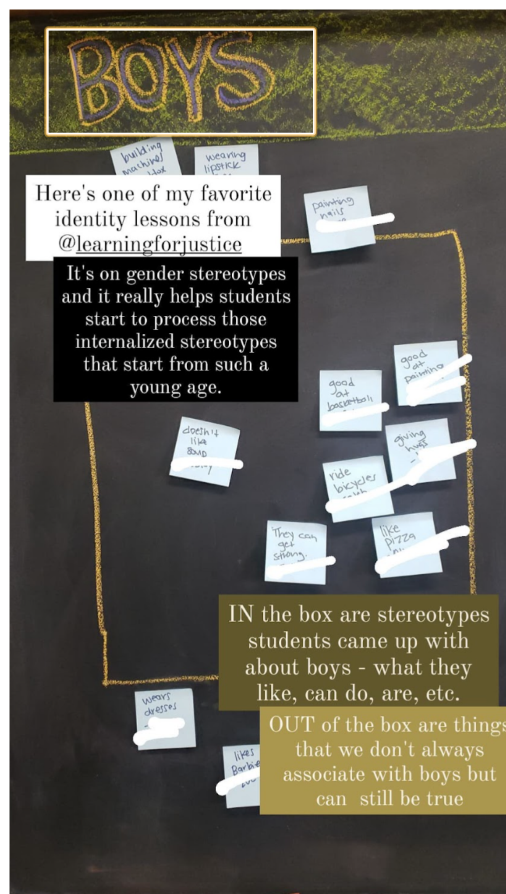
Jolene submitted an example of student writing submissions for *Detroit Writes Detroit*, an annual book written about Detroit by the students of Detroit. Jolene shared, “I would have students think about the community they lived in and write about something they loved, were

proud of or wished they could change." She saw helping students think about how they want to improve their own local community as an important part of social justice work. As an example, one student wrote: "If I could change one thing about Detroit, I would make it cleaner because people eat and throw it on the ground. I wish they would put the trash in the trash so our environment could be better."

Jolene also submitted images from her *Shades of Brown* unit. This was from a study on Black artists, one of whom focused on how to best represent Black skin in paintings. Jolene had her students start mixing different colors to find their own skin tones to "embrace that part of their identity as something beautiful and unique to them that is worthy of celebration." This year, she plans to extend that conversation by learning about Bellen Woodard's *More than Peac*h project. Students will start to identify where representation is lacking and what they can do about it. Jolene sees this as a progression from learning about diversity to moving into justice work.

Figure 3

Breaking Gender Stereotypes Unit



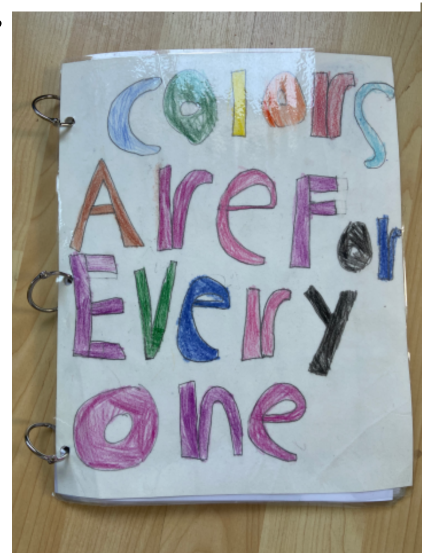
Finally, she included a photo from a unit about gender stereotypes where students identified common stereotypes associated with boys along with things that can also be true but are outside of the standard stereotypes. Students came up with several examples. See Figure 3 for a photo of how this worked.

Tessa

Tessa submitted photos of a book that her class made, which they titled "Colors are for Everyone". They created this book based on the picture book "Pink is for Boys" by Robb Pearlman. The book aims to break down gender stereotypes. See Figure 4 to see their final book cover. Each student created their own page of the book where they were able to write and draw about their own favorite colors.

Figure 4

Final Book Cover



Tessa also included a slideshow about identity, which went over vocabulary words like racism, protest, and gender. The slide deck also introduced students to important activists including Malala Yousafzai and Martin Luther King Jr. The deck also included information about skin color, Native Americans, and Islamic culture. Tessa uses different sections of this 29-slide deck as supplements to various books and other lessons she teaches.

Her third submission was a set of photos of "notice and wonder" pages. She put up an image, and students were able to write what they notice about it and what they wonder about it. For example, she posted a picture of hands with henna art on them, and students wrote words like "coloring hands," "paint," and "tattoos." She also included a photo of a traditional Native American dance and Chinese New Year parade. They were then able to dig into a lesson about different cultures.

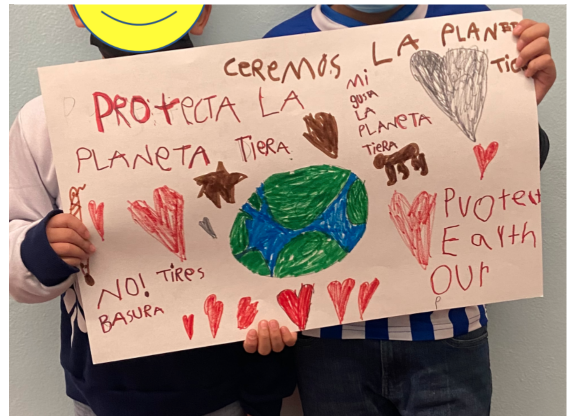
Figure 5

Protest Poster Example 1

Finally, Tessa included images of protest posters that students created after a lesson about activism and protests. The lesson focused on the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and Black Lives Matter protests, but students were encouraged to create posters about any issue they felt passionate about supporting. Figures 5 and 6 are examples of protest posters that her students created.

Figure 6

Protest Poster Example 2



Figures 7 and 8

Assimilation Demonstration Photos

Chiricahua Apaches as they arrived at Carlisle, 1886

Chiricahua Apaches 4 months after arriving at Carlisle

Mary

Mary submitted a slideshow that she uses with her students that introduces them to the concepts of assimilation and deculturalization. It begins by introducing students to the words assimilation and deculturalization by breaking them down with prefixes and familiar sounds. She makes connections to children's shows "Molly of Denali" and "Grandpa's Drum" to introduce students to Native Alaskan traditions and culture. She then introduces them to American Indian boarding schools, starting with an image of students arriving at boarding school. Students have a chance to observe, infer, reflect, and wonder. Then she

introduces a photo of the students at the boarding school four months later, and her students again have a chance to observe, infer, reflect, and wonder. Figures 7 and 8 represent the two different photos at different points in time, which clearly demonstrate assimilation, and Figure 9 shows the questions that Mary poses to her students about each of the two images.

Figure 9

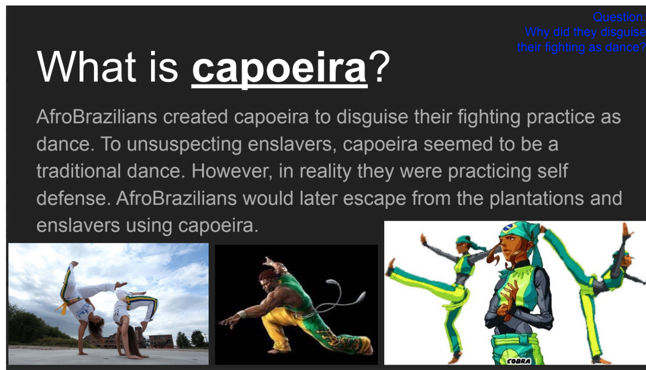
Questions About Assimilation Photos

OBSERVE (1st Person)	Infer (2nd Person)
What do you notice about the image? List the people, objects, and activities you see: type	What do you think is going on here? What makes you think that? Why do you think this picture was taken? (Its purpose) type
Reflect (3rd Person)	**Wonder/ Question (4th Person)**
If this image was taken in your community or by your students, how might it be the same or different? type	What question(s) do you have about the people or event in the photo? What question(s) might you have for the photographer? type

For Latinx Heritage Month, Mary did a lesson on Capoeira and Resistance. In this presentation, she teaches about the history of AfroBrazilians who were enslaved using self-defense disguised as dance to escape enslavement. Capoeira is explained in Figure 10 from her presentation. She then introduces students to leaders of the resistance against enslavement in Brazil's early history. At the end of the presentation, Mary connects it to supporting and honoring AfroLatinx communities today.

Figure 10

Presentation Slide: What is Capoeira?



As a third example, Mary submitted a presentation about Japanese Incarceration. In the presentation, she introduces images, vocabulary, children's books, and videos for students to learn more about the topic. In the end, she poses the discussion questions:

> What would it feel like to have neighbors and friends from school suddenly disappear because of their race? What would it be like to receive the order and have to abruptly

> leave your home with just one suitcase per person, not knowing when you would be back, and knowing that you now were viewed as a potential enemy of the US? How would you react if you were forced to move in a short amount of time because of your race, ethnicity, or gender? What kind of actions would you take or not take? How should we remember the experience of Japanese American Incarceration? Could this history be repeated? Why or why not? Are there any similar situations today?

These questions encourage students to reflect on how they might feel if something similar ever were to happen to them.

Finally, Mary submitted a math lesson that taught the students that fair does not always mean equal. She uses examples of splitting snacks between students depending on whether they brought a snack from home or not. For example, one of the questions she poses is:

> At recess there are 4 leftover coffee cakes from Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC). Nathan and Janae always come to school with two snacks but Tyler never has snacks from home. They all want the extra coffee cakes. How should the snack be shared? How much does each friend get?

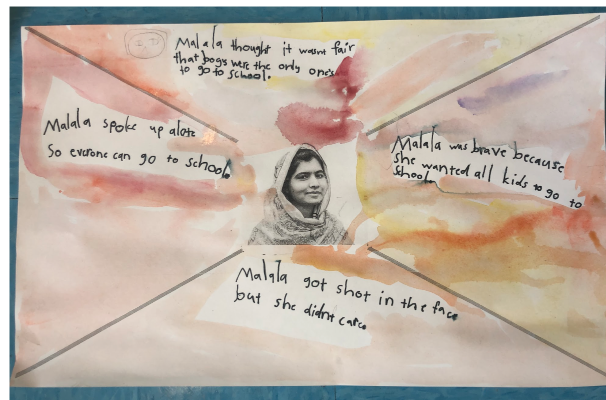
She introduces multiple other questions around food sharing in the presentation, which forces students to think about equity while practicing math.

Sasha

For her materials, Sasha included some of the books she has read in her classroom including *Mama and Mommy and Me in the Middle*, *Grandad Mandala*, and *Don't Touch My Hair*. She used *Don't Touch My Hair* as a way to discuss personal boundaries and asking permission. She also used the book *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales,

Figure 10

Artwork Celebrating Malala

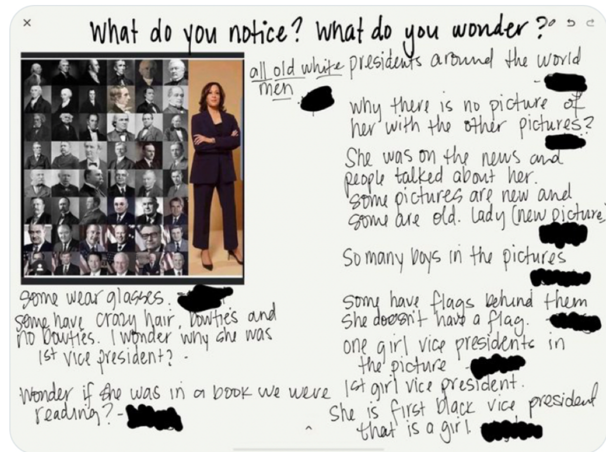


and to go with the book she created a math lesson that involved graphing monarch butterfly populations.

Sasha also shared that she taught students the truth about Thanksgiving using resources from a variety of online educators she connected with through social media. She also included a piece of artwork that her students created celebrating Malala's story, which is shown in Figure 11. Finally, she shared a notice and wonder activity her students did where they were looking at United States vice presidents. That activity is represented in Figure 12.

Figure 12

United States Vice Presidents Activity



Penny

For her materials, Penny shared images of her classroom library, empowering posters that are posted in her classroom, and the *More Than Peach* project that her students did, which goes with the book *More Than Peach* by Bellen Woodard. She also included a picture of the *Learning for Justice* magazine.

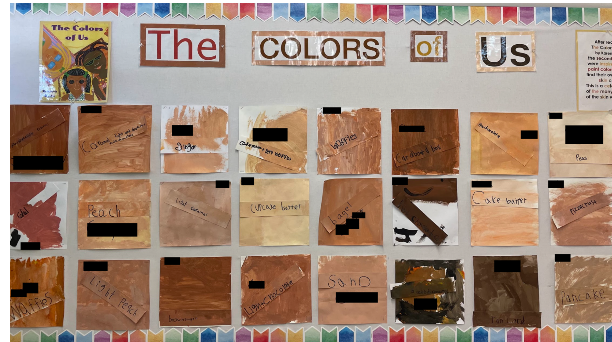
Taylor

Taylor included photos of student work and art that represented social justice lessons. Based on the book *The Colors of Us*, Taylor had students mix paints to find and name their own skin tone. Students named their skin tones names like "waffles," "cake batter," "sand,"

"caramel," "light chocolate," and more. The final paintings and names are shown in Figure 13 (student names redacted).

Figure 13

Student Skin Tones Activity



Taylor also included a picture of a bulletin board that featured an aboriginal art installation the students created, student self-portraits featured under a sign that said "all the parts of me…", and family portraits the students created. These were all displayed in the classroom at various times. They also had a "this is me!" wall where the students each drew a picture of what made them unique.

Virginia

To provide more context for the research, Virginia provided me access to her entire social justice folder in her school google drive. It included a number of lesson plans, activities, and slide shows for students. One activity was a "justice and injustice sort," where students took examples of scenarios and sorted them into "justice" or "injustice." The scenarios students sorted included examples like "putting obstacles in the way of people's ability to vote," "making a law that places have to be wheelchair accessible," "making rules about who can and can't marry each other," and "your friend getting to choose what to play every time."

The folder also included worksheets that went along with picture books, like the *Good to Be Me* writing prompts. One of the prompts encouraged students to notice differences, asking: "Did you see any differences you have never seen before? If so, tell me about it." She also had an activity that went along with the book *Same Same but Different* where students had a chance to draw characters and settings from the book. Many of the lessons and activities included in the

folder were created by other educators online, which she had downloaded or purchased from their websites or social media accounts.

Virginia also included their morning meeting slides, which include "scenario Mondays," "discussion Tuesdays," "around the world Wednesdays," and "reflection Thursdays." Each morning, students start with a prompt to discuss, think about, or reflect on related to that day's theme. For example, on "reflection Thursday," one of the prompts was, "what is a stereotype?" On "around the world Wednesdays", they learn about a different country and learn to say "good morning" in that country's language. She starts each day with these slides, so they have at least a few minutes per day focused on a justice-related topic.

Jade

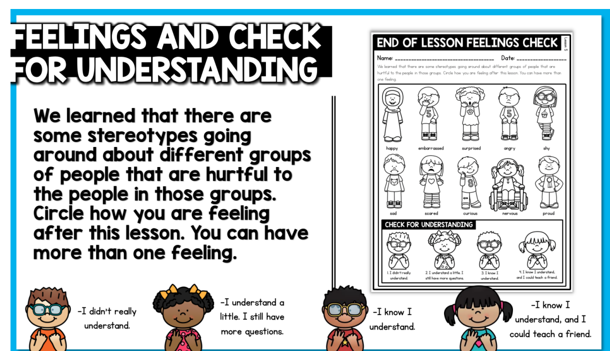
Jade included a number of lessons in the materials that she submitted. These included a presentation about Indigenous People's Day, a presentation about Black History Month, and a presentation celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr. for MLK Day. She also included a number of resources, including their school planning document for social justice curriculum, resources to draw on for Hispanic Heritage Month, and a slide deck from a Teachers College Columbia session on "Creating Listening Hives for Equitable & Inclusive Schools." A number of the lessons and activities included were created by other educators online, which she had downloaded or purchased from them.

Luciana

Luciana included a list of children's books and multimedia resources she uses. She also included a multi-day lesson plan for

Figure 14

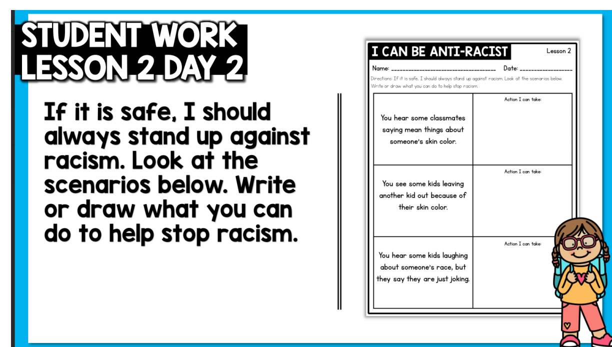
Diversity Lesson from Educator Naomi O'Brien



a history lesson that covered “honesty, courage, determination, individual responsibility, and patriotism in American and world history.” For this lesson, students learned about Ruby Bridges and other justice leaders. The lesson was taught in Spanish, and it also included several vocabulary words for students.

Figures 15 and 16

Additional Lessons from Educator Naomi O’Brien



She submitted a series of in-depth lesson plans that came from Naomi O’Brien, an online educator that is well respected by social justice educators on Instagram. The lessons covered topics of diversity, race, identity, bias, and stereotypes. For examples of what these lessons looked like, review figures 14, 15, and 16.

She also provided lesson plans about Martin Luther King, Jr. that came from online educators LaNesha Tabb and Naomi O’Brien, which she downloaded or purchased from them. Finally, she included the social justice standards from *Learning for Justice*, which outline grade-level standards for social justice knowledge.

Ruby

Ruby included photos of her students mixing paints to find their own skin tone, based on the book *The Colors of Us* by Karen Katz. She also created a Colors of Us wall, where students

Figure 17

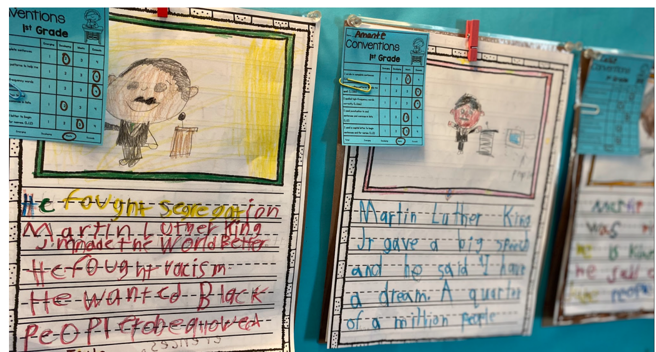
Colors of Us Bulletin Board

were able to hang up their final colors. They named their skin tones names like "cookie dough," "tree bark brown," and "baseball bat." Figure 17 shows the center of their bulletin board.

Ruby included the same series of lesson plans that Luciana submitted from Naomi O'Brien, covering topics of diversity, race, identity, bias, and stereotypes. There were also several lesson plans, including one on environmental stewardship and one on culture, connections, and community. She also included some of the *Learning for Justice* social justice standards. Finally, she submitted *Welcoming Schools* lessons on nonbinary animals, as well as three *Welcoming Schools* lesson plans connected to children's books.

Figures 18 and 19

Madonna Student Work Examples



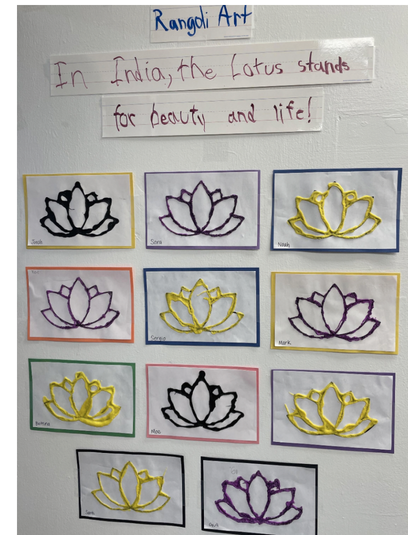
Madonna

Madonna included a number of photos of her students engaging in social justice projects, read alouds, and activities. There was a photo of one of the students' parents reading a book about Hannakuh and teaching the students about Jewish holidays. There was a photo of a "family" display where all the

students brought in photos of their families. There was a photo of a bulletin board that had self-portraits that each of the students drew, and another board that included self-portraits inspired by Frida Kahlo. Some examples of student work that she included can be seen in Figures 18, 19, and 20.

Figure 20

Madonna Student Work Example



Madonna also included information about the "Walk A Mile Challenge," which was a challenge for students to read 40 children's books related to social justice topics. She submitted a video of one of her students talking about the challenge, and that student shared: "[the book] *My Princess Boy* gave me a connection, because someone in my family feels the same way as the main character also feels in it. And I just love the connections that I had and I really enjoyed reading it." The student also talked about the other types of books they read in the challenge, such as books about immigration. The list included a diverse array of children's books covering various topics of social justice.

Sky

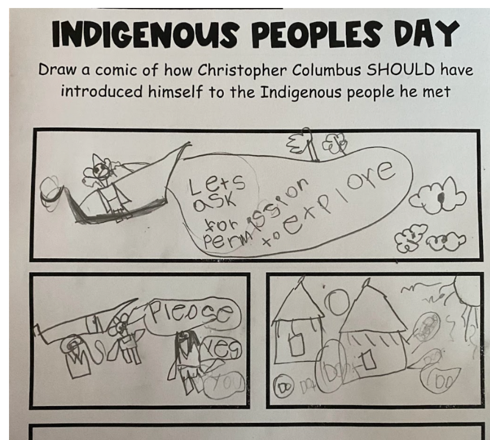
Sky submitted two photo examples of student work. The first one read "even when you are different, you are still included" with a drawing of people inside a rainbow heart. The other was a girl holding a printed sign that said "we can change the world." And finally she included a picture of a chart that said "empathy" on one side and "not empathy" on the other. Students would identify what is empathy and what is not.

Rey

Rey included a number of photos of her students, classroom decor, and student work. She included a video of a display that was set up for Day of the Dead. She also included slide decks for Black History Month, Latinx Heritage Month, Women's History Month, Asian and Pacific Islander Month, and Pride Month. Each deck included hundreds of slides with history, important figures, and more. Finally, she included the *Learning for Justice* social justice standards. Some of the examples of her students' work that she included can be found in Figures 21 and 22.

Figures 21 and 22

Rey Student Work Examples



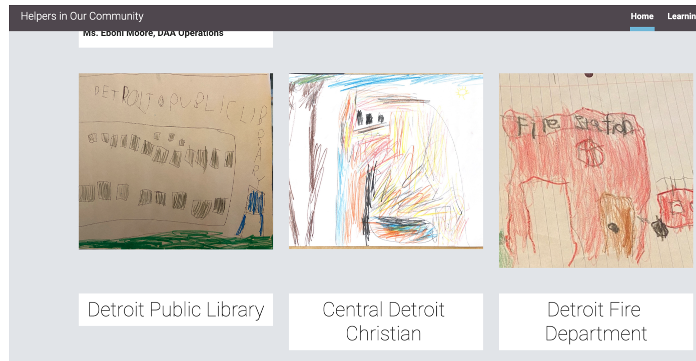
Maya

Maya submitted a comprehensive lesson plan for a module entitled "My Identity in Our Community." One of the stated goals of this lesson was that: "Students will explore their identity and the identities of others in our community. Students will build a base understanding of what a community is and how each person holds a place and role within a community." The document outlined a nine week plan of study over 22 pages. Maya's second submission was the same document for Module 2: Weather Wonders. For this lesson, "Students will begin thinking about how weather impacts people in Detroit and problems it causes. Students will begin to think about how they can help others in their communities in different types of weather." This plan also outlined a nine week detailed plan across 27 pages.

Finally, Maya submitted a link to a website that her students created to feature some of their work online. The website is titles “Helpers in Our Community.” For this project, students interviewed people who were helpers in the community and then featured them in art projects. Those art projects are now displayed on their class website to share with the wider community. Figure 23 shows a screenshot of student work from that website.

Figure 23

Helpers in Our Community Website Student Work



Samantha

Samantha submitted a series of affirmations, one for each month of the school year, that she goes over with her students. For example, part of February's affirmation is “I pledge to myself, on this very day, to try to be kind, in every way.” Each affirmation was affirming the students’ identity or encouraging them to be good humans. She also included a staff calendar for equity which outlined a topic for each month (such as respect, gender identity, and kindness), as well as book recommendations to go along with the theme. Finally, she included a lesson about culture, a lesson about “hard history,” and an identity journal activity from online educators LaNesha Tabb and Naomi O’Brien.

Juliet

Juliet provided a link to her school’s pre-k through 5th grade instructional calendars, which is used across the school community. She also included a slideshow of one day’s lesson plans, which are in Spanish because she teaches in bilingual classroom. This lesson was about

civics, and students were introduced to local and national politicians in the lesson. Figure 24 is an example of a slide from the slideshow.

Figure 24

Lesson Plan Spanish Slide

Data Analysis

Interviews

Interview audio recordings were transcribed and coded using an In Vivo coding method (Saldaña, 2021), which focuses on creating codes from actual language participants use. In Vivo coding is useful for practitioner research, as it allows for capturing the voices of the participants themselves, centering them as the experts of their experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Setting up the teachers as the experts in this study was important to me because teacher accounts are so often discredited in our society and in the research. I wanted this research to center the educators who are closest to this work and involved with it every single day. The results of this study come from the perspective of the people actually implementing this work with kids, and they are the experts on how it works or doesn't work. Teachers hold such a wealth of knowledge when it comes to education, and it's so important to center their voices in research about the experience of teaching, in this case the experience of teaching social justice. This method of coding "has also been noted for its ability to help offer a sense of nuanced meaning that other forms of coding might not allow" (Manning, 2017). This is important as I have already outlined the ways different approaches to social justice education can be distinct despite being similar. There are differences in these approaches that may seem small but are very important to

understand. Noticing these distinctions is key for understanding how this work actually happens in the classroom.

During the coding process, I looked for language and examples that explained how participants think about social justice education and themselves as social justice educators. I was also looking for specific, tangible tactics and practices they use to engage in this work in their classrooms. I will use In Vivo coding to uncover these topics in their own words. For example, the teachers tended to use the language "developmentally appropriate" rather than "age appropriate." This signifies how they think of age as compared to cognitive development. This aligned with much of what the teachers shared. For instance, Ruby said, "So when you think about the different grade levels, you're actually more just responding to the group of kids in front of you." In this case, she sees their grade level as less relevant than who they are as a group of kids. What they are ready to handle, then, is defined more by their own development than by their age.

The teachers' own words are important, rather than the words I might place on them as a researcher. For example, in many social justice educator spaces, it would be considered more inclusive to use the term "guardians," "caretakers," "adults," or "families" to describe students' caretakers. However, almost all the educators in this study used the word "parents." This matters because it goes to show that even when something isn't deemed politically 'correct,' it does not mean that language change has stuck with the teachers who are actually doing the work. This is an example similar to the use of the word "Latinx," which has been highly contested and critiqued as academic jargon that does not represent or respect the community it seeks to identify (Betancur, 2023; Ochoa, 2022). The issue of the word "parents" is complex because some young people aren't being raised by their parents, so many social justice activists and progressive

educators would encourage teachers to avoid that language (Elizalde, 2021). However, apparently the teachers in this study either did not know about the importance of this language or did not find it important to use the more inclusive language. These specifics of language are an important part of understanding how teachers who consider themselves to be social justice educators are engaging with issues of social justice.

Another example of how I conducted In Vivo coding was in the challenges teachers face. There are many known challenges to engaging in social justice education work, particularly at the elementary school level, so I identified these barriers and others as they came up. For example, many of the teachers used the words “fit it in” or “squeeze it in” when referring to the issue of not having enough time. Interestingly, they also used this same language when referring to the issue of lacking administrator support, as well as the issue of having too structured of a curriculum. This language, then, represents a larger view of how the teachers see part of their work as social justice educators - which includes “fitting it in” whenever they have a chance. I then used the In Vivo coding method to uncover how the educators understand and navigate those challenges specifically. I was looking for personal, school, community, and political context to understand their internal and external barriers, supports, and experiences that they share. To organize the In Vivo codes, I grouped them into clusters based on categories (Saldaña, 2021).

After the first round of In Vivo coding, I used Pattern coding to group the codes into a smaller number of themes. Pattern codes bring together information from the first round of codes to create more inferential concept areas (Saldaña, 2021). In this round of coding, I grouped together codes that all focused on a certain topic. For example, under the theme of “challenges,” were codes like “admin pushback”, “parent pushback”, and “time”. The overall theme was the

challenges that teachers face in teaching social justice. Conducting two rounds of coding with different methods provided a "richer perspective on the same data set" (Saldaña, 2016, p.73). I have both the In Vivo codes, which represent the participant voices and rich experiences, as well as the Pattern codes, which start to paint a picture across educators of what it means to engage in teaching social justice at the elementary school level. Both provided useful insights that ultimately led to the findings.

Educational Material Samples

For the educational materials, I used a Descriptive coding method, which is appropriate for documents and visual data (Saldaña, 2021). I was looking for specific ways of educating that indicate how social justice is taught at this age level. By comparing the codes from the interviews and the educational materials, I was able to put together a more holistic view of the work the teacher is doing.

Putting it all Together

I used the themes that came from each analysis to develop theories for answering the research questions. Using both interviews and lesson plans, I started to tease out how the data answered the research questions. This qualitative analysis gives us a rich context that is missing from much of the research on teaching social justice education, especially at the elementary school level. It also provides some tangible approaches for teaching that could immediately be adopted by other elementary school educators.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides a contextualized picture for understanding how some educators approach social justice education for early elementary school students, there are a number of

limitations to the study. This is an exploratory study that offers a broad picture of early elementary school social justice education. As such, the research questions are broad. Thus, the findings will guide practitioners; however, follow up research will be needed to understand the topic in more detail. This study demonstrates how teachers are engaging in and thinking about teaching social justice, but it is not a clear roadmap for how others can do it. While this study offers insights into this topic, significant follow-up research is needed to understand the complexities of teaching elementary school students about social justice and what it means for teachers.

Since the teachers opted-in to participate in the study, they self-defined what it means to teach social justice. While we provide some explanation of what this means to us, the teachers likely have varying degrees of understanding what it means to them. Therefore, some of the teachers may be more committed to deeply teaching social justice, while others may only integrate parts of social justice education into their classroom in a more shallow way. When speaking with the teachers, it was clear that some were more committed to this work than others. It was also clear that some were more knowledgeable and skilled in the work than others. In some ways, this is also an advantage, as it provides deeper context for understanding not only how teachers integrate social justice into their classrooms, but it also shows varying ways in which they view themselves as social justice educators and their practices as being rooted in social justice.

Given the small sample size, the results are not generalizable to the full population of early elementary school teachers who teach social justice. This is particularly true considering the various different identities that these teachers hold. For example, we do not clearly distinguish the varying experiences of teachers based on teacher race and ethnicity, student race

and ethnicity, school type, location, and number of years as a teacher. All of these factors will have a huge impact on what this work looks like for a given teacher. All of the teachers in this study identified as female, so we are entirely missing the perspective of male teachers as well. However, this research offers a picture of how some educators are engaging in this work and a better understanding of how it can be done.

Chapter 4: Findings

With a wave of public interest and political pushback, social justice in the classroom has become a hot topic for educators, policymakers, and the general public (Schwartz, 2022). However, there has been little research on how teachers are actually teaching about social justice, especially in the early elementary school classroom. The educators in this study helped illuminate how and why they teach their students about social justice, what challenges come up in the process, and strategies that other educators can start to use to bring this work to their classrooms. This chapter shows the results of their collective knowledge and experience of doing this work every day.

With this research, I was seeking to understand: 1.) The purpose and meaning of teaching about social justice for K-2nd grade educators; 2.) How these educators are teaching about topics of social justice in their classrooms; and 3.) The challenges and supports these teachers experience in doing this work. This chapter will show the complex ways in which teachers address challenging topics of social justice while navigating the various social and political contexts of classroom and school environments.

This chapter represents these findings in three sections, broken down by research question. I discuss the results in relation to Dover (2013)'s *Dimensions of Teaching for Social Justice*. This framework is drawn directly from teacher practice, and it brings together multiple conceptual and pedagogical foundations of teaching for social justice. The foundations are: democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, culturally responsive education, and social justice education (Dover, 2009; Dover, 2013). By bringing these different approaches together, we can begin to see the nuance in what it actually means to teach for social justice, including all the ways that teachers may be defining this work differently. This will give

us a more robust understanding of not just the theoretical, but also the practical work of implementing social justice education at the classroom level.

Meaning and Purpose of Social Justice in Education

The following sections, "How are teachers defining social justice education?" and "Why do they teach about social justice?" address research question one: *For K-2nd grade teachers who are teaching about topics of social justice, what is the meaning and purpose of teaching about social justice?*

How are these teachers defining social justice education?

No common definitions

Throughout the research process, it quickly became apparent that there is no clear definition or understanding of what it means to teach about social justice in practice. While I had a working definition of teaching about social justice, the educators in the study came in with their own definitions, understandings, and meaning of what this work entailed. While some spoke heavily about their own personal views and how that comes out in their teaching, others focused on specific activities and curricular approaches they use, while others still focused on policies and practices that are designed for social justice.

This lack of definition makes it difficult to understand what someone means when they self-identify as teaching about social justice, which means that each individual teacher in this study had a different approach to teaching about justice. On the one hand, this is helpful because the work can be so centered on a specific local community, identity, or issue area based on the group of kids and the teacher. On the other hand, this means that the quality and content of social justice education can vary significantly between teachers and classrooms, and it was clear that it

did with the 17 teachers in this study. It also means that certain approaches and lessons are being deemed as social justice, which may or may not fit into the working definition of social justice education that I am using for this research.

Most of the definitions and examples that teachers provided fit into the theoretical framework, Dover's (2013) Dimensions of Teaching for Social Justice (see Figure 25), in some way. For example, much of it was multicultural education, where the focus was on representation of different cultures and identities in the classroom. There were also clear examples of culturally responsive education and critical pedagogy. While Dover's (2013) model includes all five of these dimensions as aspects of teaching for social justice, alone they do not represent the full scope of what it means to teach for social justice. One of the defining characteristics of teaching for social justice, according to Dover (2013), is teaching *about* social justice, or specific academic content. For this study, teaching about social justice was a prerequisite for inclusion, though the teachers self-defined what they considered to mean teaching about social justice. Some teachers delved deep into multiple topics of social justice on a regular basis, while others stayed relatively surface level with their teaching. Therefore, even though they were all teaching about social justice, they were doing so to varying degrees and in varying ways.

While teaching *about* social justice is one of the most important defining characteristics of this model, it also requires some drawing from the other dimensions to be complete; that is, teaching *about* social justice is necessary but insufficient for truly 'teaching *for* social justice' by Dover's definition. In addition, the policies, practices, pedagogy, or curriculum must also be informed by some of the other dimensions in the model. While this study focuses on teaching *about* social justice, it's worth understanding how other frameworks and pedagogies play into what it means to teach *for* social justice.

Figure 25

Conceptual and Pedagogical Foundations of Teaching for Social Justice (Dover, 2009).

Dover's (2013) Dimensions of Social Justice

In the absence of a common definition, many of the teachers in this study used specific examples as a way of defining what it meant to be a social justice educator. Some of these examples were teaching *about* social justice, but many of them also fit into Dover's (2013) other dimensions of teaching for social justice. It seems that most of the teachers considered all of the factors of being a social justice educator to be merged together in some ways, which makes sense in practice. While we can tease these elements apart in the research, the day-to-day life of a

teacher is going to fuse them in a way that is difficult to unmerge when it comes to real life in the classroom. Examples of each of the elements of Dover's (2013) model came up throughout the interviews.

Culturally Responsive Education

Culturally responsive education or culturally responsive pedagogy has become a buzzword in education over the past few decades. Howard (2010) defines culturally responsive pedagogy as a framework that:

> …recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that students from diverse groups bring to schools and seeks to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing student academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well being. (p.67-68)

Many of the teachers in the study were seeking to be responsive to their students' needs and cultures. Virginia wanted every student in her classroom to feel "like they matter, they belong, they feel seen." This underlying desire to have students feel seen is an important aspect of being a social justice educator. Luciana shared:

> I just want my kids to see things for how they really are, but also not like in a negative [way]... you're still amazing and you're still awesome just the way that you are… Having them see themselves contrary to what… society is trying to tell them that they are.

Her focus was on making sure her students felt important and that their identity was valued in the classroom. She continued:

> I think the biggest thing for me is just making sure that it's open-ended a lot. Like I said, a lot of the things that I base my lessons on in general is literally just on the foundation of like: what do you notice, and what are you wondering?

She said she wanted to center their wonderings rather than telling them about the way things are. Juliet also felt strongly about making sure her students felt seen in the curriculum. Since her city has a large Indigenous community, she focused on teaching lessons that included Indigenous

peoples. A number of teachers considered their students' identities when putting together their lesson plans, to ensure they were represented in the classroom.

This desire to have students see themselves and their identities as valid and valued is an important aspect of teaching for social justice, but it isn't teaching *about* social justice. It could be, for instance, if a teacher is teaching students of color about racism. In that case, they would be culturally affirming their identity by talking about people of color, while also teaching about a topic of social justice. But this is not always the case. Even when it isn't teaching *about* social justice, Culturally Responsive Teaching creates a space where students can feel comfortable learning about important issues in society in a way where they won't feel attacked, judged, or blamed. This is part of the reason why the other dimensions of teaching for social justice are important baselines for being able to bring social justice into the classroom curriculum. If students don't feel safe and valued in the classroom, learning about social justice could be triggering, upsetting, and harmful for students who hold identities that aren't represented and respected in the classroom.

Multicultural Education

While there isn't an agreed-upon definition for multicultural education, it has been used as a framework for helping students understand other cultures and identities. In addition, it encourages a reflection on our own biases and identities (Özturgut, 2011). A number of the teachers in this study mentioned the concept of 'windows and mirrors' as a tool for teaching in a multicultural and inclusive way. Rey explained that it means "like mirrors to reflect the students and… culturally affirm them, and then windows into other parts of the world." This method would require both multicultural education (windows where students can learn about other cultures) and culturally responsive education (mirrors where students can see their own cultures

represented). Both are important, and both would be part of what it means to teach for social justice.

The primary way that teachers brought multicultural education into their classroom was through books. Virginia shared that she is always “making sure I have as many different types of books and characters and skin colors and whatever I can.” Some of the teachers noted that this method was really only a starting point, and they did not see it as the depth of teaching about social justice in the way they wanted to. Luciana said:

> So it was really basic, like, you know, foundational, like, let's get… books that reflect who you are. And get books that reflect people who [have a] culture that you're probably not going to see in this community because it was such a homogenous community.

Her description of it as “basic” and “foundational” demonstrates that she did not believe that simply having different cultures represented in books was enough for really teaching for social justice. This aligns with Dover’s (2013) dimensions because she identifies the dimension of multicultural education as making up part, but not the whole, of teaching for social justice. This also aligns with my view, as I see multicultural education as part of a larger holistic approach to teaching for social justice.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is focused on fostering critical thinking skills to empower oppressed groups to understand and transform their own realities. This framework assumes that students have the ability to co-construct knowledge with the teacher, and an emphasis is placed on taking a critical view of society and systems of inequality (Friere, 2000).While this dimension of teaching for social justice came up less often than multicultural education or culturally responsive education did in this study, there were still examples of critical pedagogy from the interviews.

Sasha talked about how she let students guide the learning process. She said, "I kind of just go with whatever they're passionate about and kind of try to guide them, but also expose [them] to other types of justice." By doing this, she was encouraging them to take a critical view of society but also allowing them to lead the learning process in some ways. She stepped back as the teacher and did not label herself as the expert, which is a core tenet of critical pedagogy. She invited her students to bring their knowledge and background into the classroom, creating a problem-posing education style rather than a banking education style (Friere, 2000).

Jolene also encouraged her students to recognize oppression in society, which is a key part of critical pedagogy. She said:

> Talking about race… some of you benefit from the system, and if you want to fight it, it means you're gonna have to give up some of your power. And some of you don't benefit from this system, but you can still do things to stand up… You can recognize when things aren't fair.

She wanted her students to feel empowered to speak up against oppression and injustice when they saw it in society. This is one of the main beliefs of critical pedagogy, which encourages questioning societal norms, confronting real world issues, and fighting injustice. It is focused specifically on learning about your own oppression so you can fight against it. This aligns closely with teaching for social justice, but critical pedagogy tends to focus primarily on students with marginalized identities. It has them consider primarily or only those identities that are marginalized, rather than holistically considering their privileged and oppressed identities. In teaching for social justice, all students (regardless of identity) would learn about multiple topics of justice, whether they are personally impacted by them or not. They would learn about areas where they hold privilege and areas where they don't, and they would learn how to handle and approach those areas differently based on their privilege or lack of privilege.

<u>Democratic Education</u>

Democratic education focuses on connecting students to the larger society through fostering their own individual identity (Meier & Gasoi, 2017). Dewey (2012) pioneered democratic education, and he saw the meaning of education as helping create a society built on shared communication, individual search for meaning, and collective pursuit of a functioning society (Dewey, 2012). Democratic education has thus been seen as a means for creating young people who are committed to becoming engaged citizens. Three areas of focus of democratic education include: to provide students knowledge about democracy; to give students the skills to engage with democracy; and to help students develop the dispositions and values needed for effective involvement in a democratic society (Biesta, 2007).

Jolene wanted her students to feel like they could make an impact on their communities. She shared:

> I want the students to feel like when they leave school, they have the capacity to change the world around them, to make it a better place and to make it the place that they want to live in… How do they take action now? How do they make their community a better place now? Because they can, they're seven and eight, but they can do that.

She wanted her students to feel empowered to get involved with making change in their community right now.

Maya also felt that it was important to empower her students to identify issues in their community and see how they could be part of solving them:

> And just like giving students agency and voice to feel like they can contribute to the world and also expose them to some problems in their community, and not view everything as perfect and magical. Like the world as real problems. And you know, even though students are very young, they have the ability to learn about the problems, and also think about how they might contribute to those.

She talked about how she would tie curriculum requirements to the local community and activism work. For example, when teaching about the weather (a required part of the curriculum), she taught students about how extreme weather impacts different people in their

community and beyond. Then they talked about what could be done to help those who are impacted by extreme weather events. By doing this, she was able to cover the required curriculum while encouraging students to think about their role in identifying and solving problems that come up for people in their local community.

Sasha also pushed her students to think about world issues and then consider how they could have an impact at a local level:

> …they usually kind of pick up on things that they seem to care about… We really make our unit that way, because we start with like: world… And then.. it gets smaller, so we start with 'world', and we go to the nation, state, and then city and then now: what can *you* do?

Similarly to what Sasha was hoping her students would do, Juliet's students took an interest in activism in their local community. She shared, "Our students became so passionate about water conservation. And we live in Minnesota where the boundary waters are. There's mining and fracking being done near them. So they wanted to write and advocate about protecting our fragile ecosystems." This focus on community and action is aligned with the core idea of being an engaged citizen that comes from democratic education.

This focus on action and the local community is one of the most important pieces of democratic education. However, just like each other element, democratic education makes up only a piece of Dover's (2013) dimensions. Democratic education does not involve spending a significant amount of time teaching students about different issues of social justice. Rather, students focus on finding their own passions and working to create change in their community in a way that makes sense to them, which may just be by being an active and engaged citizen. It does not require active changemaking or learning about issues of justice the way that other aspects of teaching for social justice do.

Social Justice Education

Dover (2013) separates social justice education as one of the pillars of "teaching for social justice." However, I will not be highlighting the distinction between "social justice education" and "teaching for social justice" for the sake of this research. In this work, I will use those terms interchangeably. They both represent a collective approach that considers democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and culturally responsive education (Dover, 2013; Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). For the sake of this research, we're looking specifically at teaching *about* social justice, so I will not be distinguishing between these two terms.

Why do these teachers teach about social justice?

Students deserve this: "How dare you deprive my kids?"

A common theme that came up throughout the research was the idea that students deserve to be taught about issues of social justice. This was often expressed as a form of regret at what the teachers missed out on learning about when they were young. Virginia summed it up when she said "I think I would have benefited from it as a little kid, I mean we never talked about anything like that." A number of the teachers also reflected on a similar thought that they would have benefitted from this as a child, and they feel that their students deserve to have the same. Sky expressed:

> And I feel like with this work in particular, exposing them to the work as early as possible is the best thing that we can do to guarantee that we're creating a generation of students that understand these things that many of us weren't taught in school.

Jolene shared a similar sentiment about having information about justice kept from her:

> …we don't know what we're talking about a lot because we've purposely, purposefully been kept from that information in the past, and [I am] making sure that students are not that way, right? That they're given as much access to information as they can have.

Luciana reflected on her anger at not having been taught about issues of justice and diversity in school:

> I base a lot of it based off of my experience and growing up in the US educational system… there's so much that they denied us…. And I just, I don't want anyone else to go through the same thing that I went through.

She felt that her identity was not validated in her school experience, and that she wasn't "exposed to the realities of the way that things were". This felt like a huge disservice to students of color who were facing the very real realities of oppression and injustice on a day-to-day basis. She also felt it wasn't fair that she didn't see the representation of incredible people who looked like her and made incredible contributions to the world. This frustrated Luciana, and she wanted to make sure her students didn't experience the same thing. She continued, "I was like, how dare you deprive me of all these things? How dare you deprive other people of all these things? How dare you deprive my kids of these things? Like, how dare you?" This sense of frustration at having not been taught about justice shapes the ways the teachers in this study thought about and taught about social justice in the classroom. Rey shared:

> They love being empowered, and they love the idea that I'm telling them the truth. I talk about that, a lot of like, 'I was lied to by my teachers growing up and I will not lie to you. Here is history, here is the truth.' And they're really into it.

This sense of injustice at not having been taught this was part of the motivation for many of the teachers to bring justice into their classrooms. The theme of students deserving this kind of education came up again and again.

Jade felt that giving kids exposure to these topics was a mission in life for her. She expanded:

> I think the kids that… are non-white… especially thinking about racial justice or like being exposed to other things, they deserve that. And then the kids that are white also deserve it. Because if you… if your scope of the world is just upper middle class educated white people, I just don't feel like that's fair because that's not how the world is.

She felt this was important for all kids - whether they held privilege in a certain area or not. Those who held the privilege deserved exposure to diversity. Those who did not hold privilege deserved to see their identity represented in the classroom. Jade continued:

> And I think there's…cool and cruel things happening in a world that kids hear glimpses of, but aren't like, there's not lots of time or opportunity for that to be explained. And so, I think…That's important. I think if you're going to kind of prepare your kid for the future, they need to have, you know, more in their brains than just math, science and reading.

Overall, the sentiment shared by the teachers in this study was that they were on a mission to give students what they deserve, which in this case meant teaching them about justice. This colored and fueled how they thought about social justice and how they did the work. For them, this was a huge part of the purpose of teaching about social justice - to give the students what they deserve.

Can't be neutral: "It's not optional"

In addition to feeling that the students deserve to be taught about issues of justice, many of the teachers also expressed a strong sense of moral necessity for themselves to engage in this work. They felt the sense that they had to bring up issues of justice in their classrooms because they knew about it. It felt like a requirement, morally, for them, giving them a sense that they had to do it. They also often acknowledged that education isn't and can't be morally neutral, so they had to stand for something, and they wanted it to be the right thing. Mary summed it up when she said, "it's too important not to say it."

When pressed why they continued to teach about social justice despite challenges, many of the teachers shared that they could not in good conscience *not* teach about issues of justice. They related this to many potential factors, including current events, new learning, or personal awakenings. Regardless of where the drive came from, the outcome was often the same,

especially once social justice became a priority for them personally. They started to bring it into the classroom. Taylor shared:

> So you've got to at least say something, do something, you know? Like, I can respect if you need to build your comfort level on how to have these conversations. But saying nothing just isn't an option anymore.

Tessa had a similar viewpoint, highlighting that she doesn't feel like there is a choice:

> It's definitely not optional, right? It is not something I can just willy-nilly about or like dip my toe in. Like it's really important work... it's incumbent upon educators and anyone who works with kids to do the work that we need to actually have a more just and more peaceful world… Like, it's not optional. It just, it has to be. It has to be done.

There are a number of reasons teachers may feel like there isn't a choice, but the common theme is that most teachers in this study did not feel like they could morally simply choose to just stop teaching their students about justice. Rey said, "you can't be neutral on a moving train." Once again, this came back to the idea that education cannot be neutral. She went on to explain the need to actively push against the status quo in order to enact real change, and she felt that was her personal duty and obligation as an educator.

This strong sense of moral obligation came up in many different ways throughout my conversations with teachers. Jolene shared her viewpoint:

> It's not enough to just know about these things… How are you teaching students to do something about them? So the action piece, because knowing about diversity, understanding and celebrating your identity, and recognizing injustice isn't enough. Like, what are you going to do about it now?

For her, it was so important to take what she knew about justice and put it into action by teaching her students about it. Once she knew what she knew about justice, she didn't feel like she could sit by and not do something about it. Her way of doing something about it was through teaching her students about it.

Training or experience

Some of the teachers in the study teach about social justice in part because they were trained to do so. They went through graduate education programs that centered social justice as part of their teaching philosophy. So the reason they were bringing justice into the classroom was that they were trained to do so during their teacher training. For others, it was experience that made them start teaching about social justice. Without the training, most teachers did not start teaching about social justice in their first year of being a teacher. Tessa shared that “it wouldn’t even have crossed my mind, like the first few years to even think about why teaching social justice mattered.” Since her teacher training program didn’t include social justice, she never thought about teaching it in her early years as a teacher.

Rey, on the other hand, had a completely different experience because her master’s program was centered on social justice. She shared that her, “ master's program is like fully social justice. They call us social justice educators. Like that's the whole thing. So I was eager and ready to do that kind of work right away.” When Rey stepped into the classroom, social justice education was already on her mind, and that was true for other educators who went through social justice-focused teacher education programs. For most of the teachers, that wasn’t the case.

For those teachers, it was often a personal experience, a professional development training, or a school initiative that made them start thinking about teaching their students about social justice. Maya learned more about being a social justice educator through a teacher professional development program. She shared:

> When I received that training, I came to my boss and my administrators and I was like, ‘oh my gosh, let me tell you all about this training I received’. And so then I started experimenting with how I could implement that in my classroom.

Similar to Maya, it was an outside force that pushed Samantha into the work as well. Her school started an initiative to bring social justice into their culture, and she became part of it:

> They just kind of immersed me in it. And at the time, my school was really wanting to start [social justice education]. So my second year of teaching, they had hired a director of equity and inclusion. And so then that summer they had done what they called an equity institute… And there were two people from my school that went and I was one of them. And so then I helped.

She was excited about the social justice work, but it took this push and learning for her to really be prepared to bring social justice into her school and classroom.

For Ruby, it was also outside forces, but in her case, it was societal issues and politics that pushed her to engage in this work. When she spoke about why she started to bring social justice into her classroom at the time that she did, she shared:

> I think if I remember correctly, that's right around the time… George Floyd? Yeah, and Black Lives Matter. Yeah, and it just was coming really into the forefront of our, just our society, the world…. it just felt so natural and so like, 'oh my gosh, it's so time to start integrating this into the curriculum and teaching children, like having it be part of everything that we do, so that they too have this language.'

It was the spike in racial awareness of 2020 that made her realize that she wanted to bring issues of justice into her classroom. Whether it was through training, a personal experience, a school change, or a societal experience, the teachers in the study had something that pushed them into social justice education; however, for those teachers who had training related to social justice education, that push came sooner in their educational journeys.

How Social Justice is Being Taught in the Classroom

Research question two asks: *For K-2nd grade teachers who are teaching about topics of social justice, how are they teaching about social justice topics in their classrooms?* The sections "What is a social justice curriculum?" and "How do teachers decide what to teach" illuminate the findings related to research question two.

What is a social justice curriculum?

There is no curriculum: "It doesn't work like that"

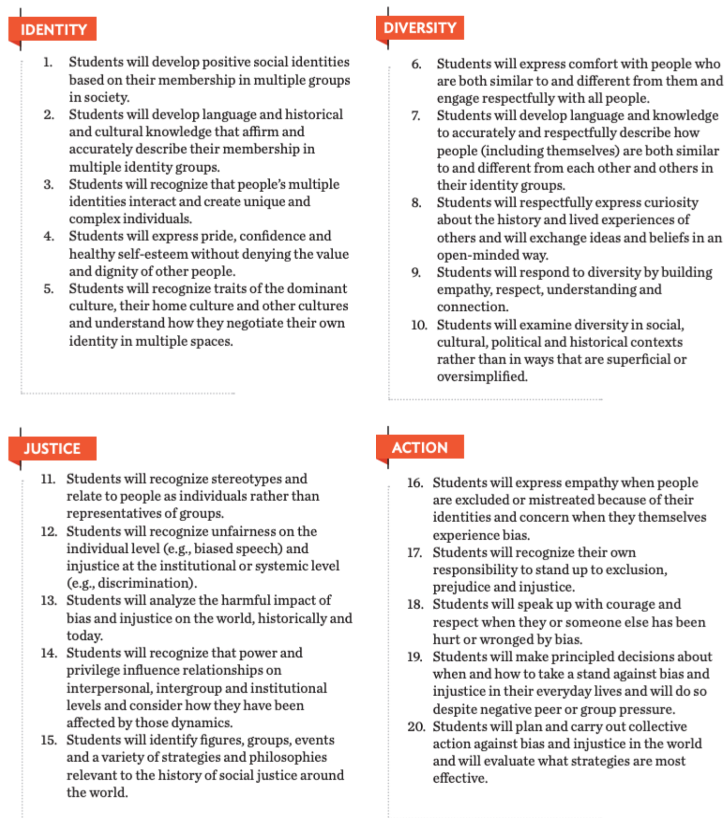
Just like there are no common definitions for what it means to teach about social justice, a common theme was that there is no curriculum for teaching about social justice. While a number of the teachers use the Social Justice Standards from *Learning For Justice*, these standards present learning outcomes, much like the Common Core standards, and they don't provide actual curriculum or lesson plans to follow.

The *Learning for Justice* (formerly *Teaching Tolerance*) Social Justice Standards, provide little by way of curriculum to actually implement in the classroom. The standards are "a set of anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes divided into four domains—identity, diversity, justice and action (IDJA)…Teaching about IDJA allows educators to engage a range of anti-bias, multicultural and social justice issues" (Teaching Tolerance, 2016, p.2). The *Learning for Justice* standards include anchor standards for each of the four domains. For example, one of the identity anchor standards is "Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces." One of the justice anchor standards is "Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics." See all of the anchor standards in Figure 26.

Tessa summed it up when she said, “that’s part of our problem, is that… there is like… there's really not so much for elementary…we have our math curriculum, we have our reading curriculum. We don't have a social justice curriculum.” While they know exactly what to follow and what to do when it comes to other subjects, teachers have very little in terms of a road map for social justice lessons. This became apparent in the ways that educators talked about how they taught social justice.

Figure 26

Learning for Justice Anchor Standards and Domains



IDENTITY

1. Students will develop positive social identities based on their membership in multiple groups in society.
2. Students will develop language and historical and cultural knowledge that affirm and accurately describe their membership in multiple identity groups.
3. Students will recognize that people’s multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals.
4. Students will express pride, confidence and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people.
5. Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces.

DIVERSITY

6. Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people.
7. Students will develop language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including themselves) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.
8. Students will respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and will exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way.
9. Students will respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding and connection.
10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified.

JUSTICE

11. Students will recognize stereotypes and relate to people as individuals rather than representatives of groups.
12. Students will recognize unfairness on the individual level (e.g., biased speech) and injustice at the institutional or systemic level (e.g., discrimination).
13. Students will analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today.
14. Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics.
15. Students will identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world.

ACTION

16. Students will express empathy when people are excluded or mistreated because of their identities and concern when they themselves experience bias.
17. Students will recognize their own responsibility to stand up to exclusion, prejudice and injustice.
18. Students will speak up with courage and respect when they or someone else has been hurt or wronged by bias.
19. Students will make principled decisions about when and how to take a stand against bias and injustice in their everyday lives and will do so despite negative peer or group pressure.
20. Students will plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world and will evaluate what strategies are most effective.

Some of the teachers, it seemed, would just randomly bring up issues as they thought of them, or as they came up in real life. Mary said, “I'm making sure I’m touching on those topics all year. So like, I'll randomly [think], ‘oh, we haven't talked about this issue.’ Like, I'll pull up a book because I don't want them to forget.” In this way, she’s bringing justice into her classroom, but there is little intention or plan behind it. This makes sense because there is no curriculum or path to follow, so the teachers sometimes had to just make it up as they went. Madonna explained that as a teacher, she is constantly being given new books and materials that she has to

teach. But when it comes to social justice “it's not like, oh, here's a book… we're in chapter one today…it doesn't work like that.”There is no book, script, or structure to follow when it comes to social justice, like there is with other subjects. Madonna elaborated:

> Sometimes we're watching things, or we're doing something, or we're talking, or a student is sharing, and that starts the conversations. So I wouldn't say that I have a lesson plan, like a pacing guide, like okay this six weeks we teach Hispanic heritage and this six weeks we do, you know, gender equality and then this… It isn't like that… it just kind of depends.

While having no lesson plans gives the teachers flexibility to respond in the moment to what is going on in the classroom or in the world, it also makes it difficult to create any kind of structure when teaching about social justice, especially across classrooms or grade levels. For example, Rey explained that different teachers in her school will cover different topics in varying order or even at all. Another teacher in her school covers enslavement with her students after covering identity. Rey, on the other hand, doesn’t go into enslavement with her students. Since there isn’t a curriculum to follow, each teacher has to make those decisions about what to cover on their own. Even with the same teacher, the social justice lessons could look very different from year to year based on the students, current events, or even the mood of the teacher.

Sky also saw the issue that the curriculum wasn’t standardized or even outlined similarly across her school community. While she was teaching about social justice, other educators in her school were not. She shared:

> So the way that I explicitly teach social justice weekly, every grade is not doing that. And I think that's where the disconnect comes. I think we want to be the school that, you know, does this this that or whatever… But I think in order for us to get there, we have to get on the same page. And I just don't think that we're there yet.

Without a common curriculum, plan, or agreement about how social justice should be taught, it is difficult for a school full of teachers to get on the same page. Every educator comes in with their own ideas about whether social justice is important, what issues are important, and what it

means to teach about social justice. Schools don't always have the resources to put together a meaningful curriculum that could be used across the grade levels. Even if schools did this on their own, the quality of lessons would vary between schools. This is true for all lessons, but can be particularly important for topics of social justice because approaching them in the wrong way can cause significant harm to students of certain identity groups.

The lack of curriculum shows up significantly across schools, even when the same teacher is teaching. Jade recalls that at her previous school, their social studies lessons were all focused on social emotional learning and social justice. The teachers had flexibility to develop the curriculum based on what they felt was important to cover. At her current school, that's not the case. Now, she isn't sure what she is supposed to (or permitted to) cover at all when it comes to social justice. A number of the teachers mentioned that at a past school, they weren't able to cover as much social justice curriculum as they do now, so they either didn't do it, or did it very differently. So even the same teacher, teaching kids in the same grade, will cover an entirely different curriculum based on the school they are at and the level of support or lack of support that they have at that school.

Books as curriculum: "The most powerful way"

Since there is no script, curriculum, or even standardized guidelines to follow, the teachers often turned to books to teach about social justice concepts. In fact, for the majority of the teachers in this study, books are the centerpiece of social justice education. This can range from simply reading a book to have representation of a certain identity in the classroom, to full on units lasting weeks or longer created around specific books. Sometimes, teachers just want students to see themselves (or others) represented in the books on the shelf. Virginia explained, "my classroom library, for example, making sure I have as many different types of books and

characters and skin colors...” In this way, teachers just have the books, and in having them, they see that as an act of teaching about justice to their students. Some of the books may even teach explicitly about social justice topics through the message of the book. Books are used as another tool for promoting a just classroom, or it can be because that is all the teacher is able to do in terms of justice. They may not be permitted to teach directly about social justice, so instead, they use picture books as a way to bring justice into the classroom. For Luciana, she shared that at a former school, her primary way of bringing justice into the classroom was through diversity in books. When schools won’t allow deeper study of justice, this can be a tool for teachers to ensure their students are feeling represented and seen in the classroom, at least in a small way. Most (though certainly not all) elementary schools are supportive of having many different books in the classroom, so this is something that many teachers can implement right away.

Even though simply having diverse books available can be very surface level, this alone can help kids develop a strong sense of understanding and empathy. Ruby shared:

> It's so great in elementary school, K through two especially, there's so many books that are a way into introducing, you know, what we want to start talking about. And it's so beautiful to watch the kids just kind of experience, like I can see their faces, like what the characters are feeling and empathizing.

By connecting with characters in a book, students strengthen their ability to understand the challenges those characters are facing and develop empathy for those challenges. So, for example, if a character in a book was an immigration and the book told the story of their immigration to a new country, young people could feel empathy for the character in the book, thus developing a sense of understanding when it comes to the issue of immigration. This root of understanding and empathy will help them in developing a strong sense of justice. For students in the class who may be immigrants themselves, or come from a family of immigrants, reading

that book would allow them to see their own story represented in the classroom. This helps young people feel seen and understood in the classroom.

Another common way that teachers were using books was to present an idea at a surface level, even if they weren't ready to go into it yet. This gave kids exposure to an issue in an interesting way without going into too deep of a conversation or lesson about that topic just yet. Taylor discussed how she was able to use books to provide some representation of Native Americans, and she acknowledged that it was only a start. By introducing the topic, she could then come back to it later in the year, and her students would have some background knowledge about the topic. Similarly, Maya uses books as a way to 'baby step' into a topic:

> The baby steps have looked like…breaking down some assumed gender norms a little bit. So like reading books or having discussions about, well this student likes to play this activity, and this student identifies as a boy, and the activity they want to play is dress up. Like, how do you feel about that?

By starting conversations like these with students, teachers can step into a topic without preparing a full lesson plan about that topic.

Other times, teachers use the books in a more complex or direct way. Many teachers use class 'read alouds' to present new ideas or reinforce concepts they've learned. Taylor said, "my favorite way, the most meaningful way, the most powerful way for me to bring certain topics in is with read alouds." She also said that books are the main materials she uses in her classroom to teach about justice. Most of the other teachers shared this sentiment as well. To do this, they might use the book to start out a lesson or unit on a certain topic. Sasha said, "So with the lessons, I usually just start with the book. Like whatever book we're reading. I start with that." By starting with the book, teachers can introduce the topic in a way that engages students right away, since young kids tend to connect well with stories, and then they can ease into a conversation about the topic. Sasha continued:

> And then I think… I just listen. I think I've gotten to the point where now that I can read the book and know what questions to ask, to get them to where I want, what I want them to say. And then listening to… them… sometimes I can predict what they're going to say.

She went on to say she is able to use this insight to guide them towards what she is hoping they will learn from the lesson. In this way, Sasha is able to guide her students through a conversation into a topic by using the book as a conversation starter. In a similar way, Juliet used read aloud books to get a sense of where her students were at when it came to a particular topic. She said, "During these read alouds, you can really figure out: what content do they know? And what are they really curious about?" She would pay close attention to her students' questions, comments, and reactions. As a teacher, she could then take that information to build a lesson that would be relevant and interesting to her students specifically.

After a lesson is over, some teachers continue to use books throughout the year to refresh and revisit that topic, as a way to ensure that students recall what they've learned over the course of the year.. Mary said, "I'm making sure I'm touching on those topics all year.I'll randomly [be] like, oh, we haven't talked about this issue [recently]. Like, I'll pull up a book because I don't want them to forget." In this way, teachers can continue to reinforce not only the original lessons, but also they can encourage students to build connections between topics that they've learned in the past and those that they are learning now.

Many of the teachers expressed that the picture books could do a better job of explaining a topic than they were able to anyways. Penny said, "if I can find a picture book that is doing a much better job of telling what I'm trying to tell, I'm going to defer to the picture book because it's already tampered for that age." This makes complete sense, considering that books are some of the only resources that many teachers have when it comes to materials for social justice education. Madonna used picture books as a way to ensure the content was age appropriate. She

shared, “most everything we do is: start [with] the book. And that book is an age-appropriate picture book that can start the conversation. I would never just start an activity without any background knowledge or without any schema…” Instead, she reads a book, as a way to engage the students and meet them where they are at.

By starting with the book, they have a built-in age-appropriate resource that breaks down the topic for kids in a way that they will understand and connect with. This starting point helps teachers create background knowledge that they can then build upon in their lessons. Samantha also shared that books can take a heavy topic and make it a little easier for kids. She said, “a lot of books, the picture books for some reason just kind of like bring the heaviness down, I think, often.” This is likely because children’s books are designed to be age-appropriate for kids, so the lessons are light and wrapped in a relatable story.

The teachers then are able to use books, either in the moment or at a later time, to connect justice topics to the stories that young people have read. Luciana broke down exactly how these conversations about books can sometimes go with the example of Silvia Mendez from a story about school desegregation:

> It was just so cool to see them starting to ask these questions… Like one of the biggest questions that I always ask them was, okay, what do you notice? What are you wondering? Why is it that that the girl, Silvia Mendez, couldn't go to school? To that school? Like, why? And they were genuinely curious.

She was able to use these types of guiding questions to push her students to think through the injustice and why it happened. This naturally engaged their curiosity. Luciana continued to explain how this worked:

> And at the end, we were able to attach it to injustice… And every time after that, subsequently, like we would read other books and they would see things, and they were all like, Oh, Miss, that’s an injustice! And I'm like, ‘oh yeah!’

By learning about injustices in the context of the story of Sylvia Mendez, the students became good at spotting other areas where injustice might be occurring, whether that was in other books or in real life. In this way, books are able to serve as an important guide for taking complex topics and making them simple and interesting for kids. It also gives them tools to make connections and see how injustice can play out across different contexts. This is especially important for educators who otherwise have few resources to help teach about these difficult topics. Not only does it make it easier for teachers, but it also breaks it down in a meaningful way for students.

That being said, books come with their challenges. While the teachers in this study were able to rely heavily on books in the classroom, some state laws and district policies will prevent teachers in public schools from bringing certain books in the classroom. According to PEN America:

> Over the 2021–22 school year, what started as modest school-level activity to challenge and remove books in schools grew into a full-fledged social and political movement, powered by local, state, and national groups. The vast majority of the books targeted by these groups for removal feature LGBTQ+ characters or characters of color, and/or cover race and racism in American history, LGBTQ+ identities, or sex education (2022).

To call the book banning a movement is not an exaggeration. Books were banned in schools in 30 states and 138 districts, impacting over four million students in the United States. These bans can be in classrooms, libraries, or both. While historically books have been banned one at a time, these new regulations are making sweeping bans on general content areas. This can make the number of banned books hard to quantify, as they are no longer necessarily being specifically named (Mazzei et. al., 2023). According to a study by PEN America, 41% of books that were banned featured LGBTQ+ characters or themes, 21% addressed issues of race and racism, and 10% had themes of activism and human rights (2022).

The impact on teachers is significant. Madonna works in a private school in Florida, but her husband is a teacher in a public school. She talked about how the book bans in Florida have impacted his school:

> At my husband's school, the librarian had to go into every teacher's classroom and look through their library books and had to give the okay for which books could be in the classroom library. The school library also had to be done. So, do you think those kids have books in their hands yet? No, because for one librarian to do that is going to take a really long time.

Even the books that weren't banned were not available to students because the librarian didn't have time to go through every book in the library, and they closed the library until that was done. Because the state mandated the banning of certain books in schools, his school didn't want to take any chances. After all, though the laws are vague, violations could be considered a third-degree felony in Florida, punishable with up to five years of jail time (Mazzei et. al., 2023). So, students in Madonna's husband's school completely lost access to all books for months, and it was unclear when they would get access to the books again.

Sasha's sister works in Texas, and she wanted Sasha to come work at her school. Sasha said, "I was just like, I can't! Like there's no way. They would burn all my books." While the teachers in this study were lucky in that they weren't often impacted by the bans - because they had support from their district, lived in states without bans, or worked in private schools - the reality is that many teachers are impacted. This will make it difficult for teachers who want to bring justice into their classroom in an age appropriate way, since books are such a centerpiece of that work for the teachers in this study. The ongoing bans will cause significant challenges when it comes to teaching about social justice for elementary school teachers.

How do teachers decide what to teach?

Developmentally appropriate: "Shouldn't have to carry the full burden"

One of the major concerns for every single teacher in the study was to consider the issue of developmental and age appropriateness. The teachers recognized that although they felt it was important to teach about issues of social justice, these issues are complex and difficult to understand for young learners. Jade summed up the challenge when she said, "I don't want them to be living with rose colored glasses on. But I also don't want… when you're six and seven, you shouldn't have to carry the full burden that is happening around us." Many of the educators shared this same sentiment of wanting kids to understand issues around them without presenting topics that are too dark or too complex for their developmental understanding.

There are a number of factors that teachers consider when it comes to what is appropriate for their students. They think about developmental appropriateness in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and scaffolding. When it comes to curriculum, they think deeply about what they are teaching when it comes to a given topic, and often teachers come to different conclusions about what should be taught. For example, on the topic of enslavement, multiple teachers grappled with how to present it in a way that would not be too scary for kids to understand. Luciana shared:

> We briefly went into slavery too, but that's something that, like I personally have struggled with too, in terms of how to approach that topic in an appropriate manner for my students. I don't want to ignore it and I don't want to gloss over it and lessen the severity of it. But because they're first graders, it's also kind of like, how do we do that?

Other teachers didn't present the topic at all. Rey shared, "There's another teacher at this school who actually, after starting with identity and affirmation, goes back and talks about enslavement. I don't." She chose to not cover the topic of enslavement at all because she personally felt it

wasn't developmentally appropriate for her to do so, but she respected the fact that her colleague did cover it. Sky also made the choice not to cover the topic of enslavement with her students. She shared:

> I'll teach about segregation, but guess what I don't teach about? Slavery. That's not age appropriate. So there's a difference there. It's like, you know, I'm not going as deep as I can go. I'm going what I think they can handle, you know?

With Sky's students being in Kindergarten, she didn't feel that was appropriate. Luciana and Rey both teach first grade, and one of them chooses to cover enslavement and one does not. There are a lot of factors that might go into that decision, such as the teacher's racial identity, the students' racial identities, and background knowledge the students have. It's a complex and tricky topic for teachers to navigate, and while enslavement may be a particularly different one, teachers have to make these kinds of decisions for all issues of social justice.

The teachers also thought about pedagogy when they considered the issue of age appropriateness. It was important to think not just about what they taught but also about how they taught it. For example, many of the teachers talked about simplifying language to ensure students understood the concepts they were discussing. Maya shared, "We read aloud to them and kind of simplified some of the language, so they understood it a little bit better." Madonna agreed, saying she would "never use terminology" that they weren't familiar with or that was above their heads.

In addition to language, the teachers discussed different ways of presenting concepts that made it fun and engaging for the students. Tessa engaged students with projects where they were creating something with their hands. She also talked about having students do activities where they're moving around the room. Maya talked about using art projects and even a puppet show as a way to engage the students. This can be important for elementary school students in all

contexts, but it can be especially helpful when it comes to social justice content since it can be so complex and sometimes heavy to take in.

A third area where teachers thought a lot about developmental appropriateness was with scaffolding. All good education is based on some level of scaffolding where knowledge is being built upon existing knowledge. This showed up as particularly important for the teachers in the study. Madonna shared, “I would never just start an activity without any background knowledge or without any schema or coming up with any kind of, let's find out what the kids, you know, I would never.” She recognized the importance of making sure her students had some background knowledge on the topics they were covering.

Taylor scaffolded her lessons throughout the year to ensure students weren’t overwhelmed with a topic being brought up for the first time in an intense way. She gave the example of teaching about Native and Indigenous identities early in the year:

> And so by the time we get to Thanksgiving, the notion and understanding of Native Americans is not something totally unfamiliar, which I think has been a really important part of how we've shifted the way that we talk about Thanksgiving.

Many of the teachers in the study thought this kind of building up was really important. Sasha scaffolded her lessons throughout the year as well. She shared that she starts all of her topics “kind of simple” by introducing them early in the year “and then we dive deeper in the end of the year.” When she does it that way, she saw that her students were then able to make connections back to what they learned earlier in the year. This allows not only some basic level of understanding, but it also pushes them to think more deeply about it when they are learning about it later in the year. Taylor was thinking about this within her school year and also across grade levels for her students. She shared:

> And I personally feel like in kindergarten and first grade, that's okay, for now. So long as then it's scaffolded and built upon in second [grade], and scaffolded and built upon in

> third [grade], and fourth, and fifth, so that that, you know, by the time you're sending kids to middle school, they understand.

Scaffolding is important for all learning, but it can be particularly important for sensitive topics of social justice. The teachers in this study found this to be a very important part of their work as social justice educators, and as part of making social justice developmentally appropriate for their students.

Centering students: "Depends on the group"

An important element that came up for many of the educators in this study was the idea of centering their students to determine how to teach social justice in the classroom. Rey, along with many of the other educators, starts with teaching them about their own identities. She said, "I always think it's really important to first start with students' personal identity, and affirmations around that before we dive into anywhere else." By starting with the students' personal identities, teachers were able to help them get to know themselves more. This is aligned with democratic education principles, as well as culturally responsive education.

The majority of the teachers in the study based their teaching about social justice on the individual group. Rather than having a set plan, they responded to the students' identities, needs, interests, and life experiences. For example, Jolene had a student who had a non-binary sibling, so they talked about gender and non-binary identities very early on in the school year. In that way, she ensured that her student saw their family represented in the classroom. Luciana similarly responded to her students' experiences by using Spanish books in the classroom since many of her students speak Spanish at home. She wanted them to know that their language and culture is valued and welcome in the classroom as well. This theme of centering students' identities aligns with culturally responsive education, and it came up with most of the educators

in the study. Juliet focuses on teaching about Indigenous communities because there is a large Indigenous population in her city.

When it comes to deciding what to teach about, Tessa said, “it's really dependent on where our learning naturally leads to.” Virginia did something similar:

> Just like everything else with my kids, I read the room of what my kiddos need that year. So one year my kids really might need a lot of information about diversity because I can see that they feel uncomfortable with X, Y, Z, or they're questioning a lot about X, Y, Z. But another year, they might be better at that, and they might be ready for more focus on their activism, you know?

Often a topic would just come up, and the teacher would decide to address it in the moment. In Madonna’s class, sometimes watching something or reading something will spark a conversation, “so it just kind of depends.” Responding to the kids’ needs was a common theme, and Sasha summed it up perfectly when she said, “it depends on the group.”

Because it depends on the group for so many social justice educators, it can make teaching about social justice even more complex. Though a curriculum would be useful, it would need to be flexible. Teachers are considering their students’ identities and families, their background knowledge, and what is happening in the world when they think about how to bring social justice into their classroom. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching about social justice because the best social justice educators are responding to the needs and interests of their unique group of students.

Improvement over time: “The best I could when that was the best I knew”

Almost all of the teachers in the study admitted that they’ve improved significantly in their social justice teaching since they first started teaching. They have been able to learn what to teach partially through trial and error over their years of teaching. Tessa shared how when she started, the work was very surface-level:

> And so early on when I talked about native identity, it was literally like: exposure. Right? Just: 'Native people exist.' And, 'here are books,' or you know, whatever it is. Here are some things to just expose you to this topic. Native people exist. Move on. Right? And that was my starting point.

Sasha also started small, without introducing too much detail or information at first, but she realized that was a mistake:

> That first year was, that was just me trying to figure out what I want to teach them… and then realizing like, 'oh like they're little, but they know a lot more than you give them credit for,' well, than I was giving them credit for. So… I think I was kind of almost sheltering my kids in a way… realizing that I'm hindering them more than I'm helping them.

Over the years, Sasha saw more and more what her students were able to handle, but when she started in her first year, she didn't bring up too much about social justice because she wasn't sure how to make it appropriate.

Joline had a similar experience, where she continued to dig deeper into becoming a better social justice educator each year. She said she didn't really dive into it in year three, and in year one she was "just surviving," so she definitely didn't do any social justice work. But as she continued on, she was able to do more. She shared:

> But in year two and three, I probably did a little bit. And then after year three, I really, because I had my feet under me and I knew how to teach at that point, I really started to think about like, how do I weave in social justice into my classroom?

With each passing year, she was able to bring more justice into the classroom because she had a better handle on teaching in general. She continued to improve even more with her fourth and fifth year, when she joined a culturally responsive teaching teacher fellowship. There, she learned how other educators were doing social justice and she realized that she could also be doing more. She was able to learn from professional development opportunities and other educators about what else she could be doing in her classroom to deepen her social justice work. But it took time for her to get better and improve.

When Virginia shared about how she first started teaching about social justice, she admitted, “it was definitely a lot more minimal than it is now and definitely less formal.” Though she was always trying, she was not incorporating social justice as actively and intentionally as she does now. She also shared that she was teaching in a way that she wouldn’t teach again now.

> I mean, [in] the beginning of my career, I remember doing lessons that now I'm like, oh, maybe I wouldn't have done that [now]... but I was always trying, like, did the best I could when that was the best I knew, kind of a thing.

She shared about specific activities that she did with her students that now would be frowned upon, but at the time, it was the best she knew. This is common with social justice work since the field is always evolving so rapidly. Activities will become common, and then people will become aware that maybe those activities are at best unhelpful, or at worst harmful or insensitive. So teachers have to constantly evolve, and be able to admit when they’re wrong.

Joline talked about the importance of social justice educators being able to admit when they’re wrong:

> I can guarantee there are times that I have gotten it wrong, and either my students have told me… or parents. Or other teachers… And it would be really easy to just shut down and say, ‘okay well, I'm just not going to do this anymore because obviously I don't know what I'm talking about.’

Staying humble is so important for this work because it would be so easy to shut down and decide not to do it anymore. Many of the teachers talked about mistakes they had made and sometimes were called out for making. Joline continues:

> But I think that's the whole point, is that we don't know what we're talking about a lot because we’ve purposely, purposefully been kept from that information in the past. And making sure that students are not that way, right? That they're given as much access to information as they can have.

For Joline, being able to admit when she’s wrong is part of the learning process of becoming a better social justice educator over time. Mary said something similar about making mistakes. She

shared, “Early on, it was hard…but I think I just started doing it, and being a little bit more fearless. And if I made a mistake, I fixed it.” This willingness to be fearless was important for teachers to face the fact that they were likely to make mistakes. The willingness to admit when they’re wrong was just as important.

Even those with teacher training programs rooted in social justice struggled in their first few years. Luciana shared that the “theory to practice disconnect was hard” for her when she first got to the classroom. She felt like she was going to be able to come in and change the world right away, but she realized it was going to be more difficult than she thought. She shared:

> …As a new teacher, you have the basic classroom management situations and everything, and there's really strong behaviors that are attached to traumas in our communities… I was never given any professional development or anything in terms of trauma informed practices. So, it was really just like jumping into it and just trying to tap into whatever I could remember from the [master’s] program.

Mary, who also went through a social justice-focused teacher training program, admitted she wasn’t very good in her first year. “I don't think I was that good at it. I was okay at it, the first year, or even, my second year, but I know I'm really good at it now.” So even those who had the training didn’t necessarily have the skills to implement social justice work well right away in their classrooms. They had to learn through doing the work over the years with students in order to get better at teaching about social justice.

Challenges and Supports for Teaching Social Justice

Research question three asks: *For K-2nd grade teachers who are teaching about topics of social justice, what are the challenges and supports these teachers experience in teaching about social justice topics?* The sections “challenges” and “supports” below address research question three.

Challenges

Teachers face a number of challenges when it comes to teaching about social justice in their classrooms. Here, we'll go into a few of the most common challenges that came up for teachers in this study.

Family pushback: "I've always had a parent yelling at me"

The most common challenge that came up for most teachers in the study was pushback against teaching social justice. In some cases, this was perceived potential pushback, or fear that pushback would come that never did. This will be discussed in the following section about teacher anxiety. However, actual pushback was also often a real issue for teachers. Much of the pushback that teachers received for doing social justice work came from parents or families of the students.

Almost every teacher in the study faced some form of parent pushback at some point. Even though it was never the majority, it was often a vocal enough majority or even a single parent that would voice an opinion or push back. Sky said it was probably 10% of families who weren't on board who "requested to have a meeting with administration about the social justice education that was going on in kindergarten." It's not uncommon for families to go speak to administrators rather than talking to the teachers directly. Samantha shared, "so it's interesting that oftentimes, I won't get the pushback. It's something that I do and I say. I won't necessarily get the pushback, but the principal will. She'll get the email." However, this certainly isn't always the case.

Many of the teachers, especially in private schools, had stories of a parent pulling their child out of school because they weren't happy with the social justice related lessons. Mary saw this with a parent who was uncomfortable with them teaching about racism. Eventually, that

parent "pulled her kid out of school and put her kid in homeschool." Most teachers shared that it is a rare occurrence, but it does happen.

While teachers faced pushback on multiple issues, the topic of gender and gender identity caused the most issues for teachers. The majority of the teachers in the study could give an example of pushback related to teaching about topics of gender and gender identity. For example, when it comes to teaching about LGBTQ+ topics, Rey said, "I've always taught it, and I've always had a parent yelling at me for it, almost every year." A number of other teachers also expressed that the pushback they receive was often for issues related to LGBTQ+ identities and gender identity.

Ruby shared a story when it came to a conversation about gender identity. While her school is relatively liberal, and she rarely faced any pushback on topics of social justice, she experienced pushback on this topic. She shared:

> …it was just a really great conversation and a good dialogue with the class and teachers. But then a parent - and I was so shocked because this community is not that community that would ever be offended by something like that, I thought. But, I got so hot and defensive for the kids. And so like, 'how can you even question that?'

Ruby felt so passionate about supporting her transgender students that she started crying when talking about the pushback she received from this parent. It upset her to think that a family might not be supportive of all the LGBTQ+ students she may have in her classroom or families represented at the school. Even though she was shocked by this particular family's reaction to her lessons about gender identity, she also shared that a family a few years ago pulled their child out of the school because they were teaching about transgender identities.

Of course, gender identity and LGBTQ+ identities were not the only issues that some families struggled with. Sky had families that had a hard time with her teaching about race and racism in the classroom. She shared:

> I think that it's rather hard for certain parents to swallow… me [a Black woman] teaching their kids about racism. And they - what I've experienced is that they themselves have lots of reservations, and they haven't done the work themselves, their own inner work. And to them, it feels very scary and threatening and something that they'd rather not discuss with their young child.

Mary had a similar issue with a parent when it came to issues of race and racism:

> I've never had any issues with talking about race and racism except for one parent… you could just tell the white fragility was showing. And it was like she didn't know how to talk about race and racism or understand how white supremacy functions in society. And so she was trying to tell me that her kid didn't understand.

Mary knew it was not true that the kid did not understand. In fact, she said this particular student was one of the most vocal in class about the topic of race and racism. She knew that this student did understand, but unfortunately their parent did not. In the end, the parent decided to pull the student from the school and homeschool them instead.

Even with those issues that were typically supported by most families, sometimes teachers received some level of pushback. Jade was reflecting on which issues received universal support when she said:

> If you don't go too deep, people are okay with environmental stuff. Like we just did, like a little gardening. Like 'beautify the area by the library day." People love that. Everyone's full support of that. People usually full support of… like, well, I shouldn't even say that, because there was one parent that got mad.

So despite the fact that Jade felt this was an issue that was typically supported, even then she faced some pushback from a parent who was upset by it. These examples show that family pushback is likely going to happen regardless of what issues are being covered and the demographics of the community.

Teacher anxiety: "Just uncertain, wildly uncertain"

One of the greatest challenges that teachers had to overcome was their own personal fear and anxiety around teaching about social justice. This came up in multiple ways, including a fear

of pushback from parents and the fear of saying the wrong thing. While it is clear from the previous section that sometimes teachers did face actual pushback from parents, the majority of the time, families and parents did not push back or even comment on the lessons at all. Taylor explains how she felt once when an issue of justice came up unexpectedly in her classroom, and she had to respond to it:

> I remember my, like heart was in my throat, horrified of saying the wrong thing, which is the mantra, I think, of this work across the board. And, just anticipating, like the flood of emails I was going to be getting from parents. I remember thinking… don't overload them with language. Keep it simple… grab a book. Grab a read aloud. Grab any frickin read aloud you can…But I was, I was so nervous…just uncertain, wildly uncertain.

In her mind, she pictured a flood of emails, but that concern proved to be unfounded. When I asked if she actually received any emails from parents about that incident, Taylor said, “no, nothing.”

This perception that teachers would get a lot of pushback was extremely common for the teachers in this study. Virginia had a similar fear, which kept her from pushing her social justice lessons further. She shared, “it's a rather conservative town overall. So I push, but I also don't… I push as far as I feel like I can without truly getting a parent upset with me.” When asked if a parent had ever been upset or pushed back on her lessons, the answer was no. After thinking about it, she said, “I think it’s all of me projecting.” A number of teachers had a similar experience of thinking often about the pushback they would receive and never actually receiving any in real life.

Luciana also tampered her lessons because she was worried about the pushback she might receive. When asked if she had ever received any pushback, she said no. She reflected, “I think that’s just me being worried about what they're going to say.” Samantha told a story about sending an email that included a photo of a Black Lives Matter support sign. She was uncertain,

and she thought long and hard about whether to send it. Ultimately, she did send it, and she didn't receive any pushback.

Virginia said, "either they're not paying close attention, or they're more accepting that I'm giving them credit for." Many of the teachers did acknowledge that it's possible the families are more accepting than the teacher is giving them credit for, though it's worth acknowledging that in many cases, parents and guardians may just be not paying attention. The reality is, teachers do experience pushback from families, and that is a real problem. However, more often than not, they are concerned about pushback that never comes.

Responding in the moment: "Have a plan but go on a whim"

Lesson planning was challenging for teachers because there is no set curriculum, but another challenge was the issues of social justice that come up in the moment. You can't plan for what kids are going to say, so when presenting challenging topics, teachers have to be prepared to respond to the students' reactions, questions, and comments. Plus, justice issues can come up anytime in any classroom, even for teachers who aren't teaching about social justice. Those who do teach about social justice, though, likely consider more deeply how to respond in these moments. Tessa talked about how it can be hard to respond to microaggressions that come up in her classroom:

> It's tricky, like on a day-to-day basis… addressing microaggressions or anything like that as they come up in the classroom. And just myself, like trying to be aware and pay attention enough to even recognize when they do happen. And knowing how best to address it…that's like a daily thing.

These in-the-moment microaggressions are something that teachers can't prepare or plan for, so they're forced to make snap decisions in the moment on how to handle them. This requires them

to be paying attention, to notice, and to respond quickly. But, Tessa saw this as a really important aspect of being a social justice educator. She shared:

> But, I think it's a critical part about teaching social justice is dealing with situations as they arise. And so sometimes things will happen where I… feel like I need to process this for, like, a day. But sometimes that's not always helpful. Like, you need to address it in the moment. But I'm like, gosh, I really need to think about, like how do I even want to begin to correct this harm?

Teachers usually don't have the luxury of time to consider how to respond to difficult moments in a way that is compassionate, age-appropriate, and helps students learn. They often have to make snap judgments about how best to support students who may have been harmed and hold accountable students who have done harm. Or, they have to quickly decide how deep to go into a topic that comes up.

Teachers do this all while keeping in mind that they're working with very young children who likely have no concept of the impact of their words and no negative intent. In many cases, they may not even know why they said something or where they got that idea. In fact, it can be harder to address problems when there is no negative intent. Tessa continued:

> When things are done with malice, I feel like it's sometimes easier to see the path forward of how to address it. But really what's harder is when things are said by students with no malice, they just say it because they're curious six-year-olds, and they don't really get what they're saying. And so that's harder to me.

In these moments, the teacher has to not only correct the harm, but also make sure not to shame or overly criticize the six year old who said something without any malice or negative intent. Virginia also tried to balance not shaming a student while still addressing the issue:

> If you're going to blurt out [something], like you feel comfy with me. And I don't want you to feel like, 'oh now I shouldn't say anything if I'm thinking it next time.' So, it's definitely like a little bit of a balancing act.

She wanted to make sure her students continued to feel comfortable speaking their mind in her classroom, but also find a way to address negative comments or actions.

These are challenging lessons that teachers learn over time and get better at with practice, as with most things related to social justice education (and teaching in general). Sasha talked about how she changed the way she addressed microaggressions in her classroom:

> Some of the things that they'll say, little either microaggressions or something. Kids are always saying 'that's gay'... When I first started teaching, it was just like 'that's not a good word to say'. Like, don't say that word. Now, it's like, okay, I have a book for that. We're going to talk about it. We're going to say the word….And so now it's changed.

Over years of teaching and practice, Sasha was able to learn what worked and what didn't for addressing moments like this in her classroom. While she originally would just shut it down, she now uses it as a teachable moment.

It isn't always clear exactly how to respond, and this ambiguity can make it difficult for teachers. Virginia talked about the challenges she faces in deciding what to do in these moments:

> And you know, it's like… do I move past it? Or do I make this a thing? …So I think there's times where I don't necessarily know, did I make the right decision in that situation? And that's something I have to be okay with when I bring these topics into my classroom.

These moments of doubt can be difficult for teachers because they want to feel like they're doing the right thing for students, but it's a reality of being a social justice educator. Madonna summed it up when she said:

> Of course you're always uncomfortable. You're uncomfortable because it's kids, and you're uncomfortable because you're not quite sure what's going to come out of their mouth or how they're going to interpret things and go home and say things to their parents. So it's always really, really a nerve racking kind of thing.

As with fear of what parents might say, teachers contend with this fear of what a student might say and how they will deal with it on the spot.

Time: "The classic teacher challenge"

While most of the challenges faced by teachers had to do specifically with social justice and the difficulties that come along with it, teachers in this study also identified a more general challenge: time. Teachers are notoriously strapped for time, and the educators in this study were no different. Virgina called it the "classic teacher challenge of time." While it isn't specifically connected to teaching about social justice, the issue of time made it much more difficult for teachers to find time to integrate justice into their instruction.

Maya tried to integrate social justice into the other subjects she was teaching, but still it proved difficult to fit in. On top of her academic standards, she's trying to follow the *Learning for Justice* social justice standards. Taken together, it feels like an impossible task to make it all work:

> I'm looking at literacy standards, science or social studies standards, and then also trying to weave in the social justice. And so sometimes it's like, it feels like some of the topics are very distant, or hard to connect. And then also just thinking about like scoping out the whole year, the *Learning for Justice* standards - there's a lot of them. And I, I struggle to feel like I fit all of them in, in one school year.

On the other hand, Taylor is creating a scope and sequence for her school to follow that includes the same *Learning for Justice* standards, without the expectation that any individual teacher would teach them all in one year. She explained, "so we're starting in kindergarten, you know, with identity. And then first grade, identity and then a little diversity. And then second grade, remember, the identity, dive into the [diversity], so on and so forth." This approach takes some of the pressure off of teachers to cover every single standard in a year, as it's only focusing on pieces of the standards for each grade level. Still, most teachers don't have a scope and sequence to follow, so if they are using resources like the *Learning for Justice* standards, they have little to

no guidance about how to use them. This can put pressure on teachers and make them feel like they have to do it all.

There are multiple issues when it comes to time. First, teachers have to find time to plan, and with issues of social justice, that can be time consuming. After all, nobody is an expert on every single issue of justice, especially taking these complex issues and making them developmentally appropriate, then turning them into fun and engaging lesson plans. Rey summed up the issue of planning time when she said “you have to plan out of the goodness of your heart.” She shared that she is paid for six hours a day, which is the time she has students in front of her in class. She isn’t paid for recess, or planning, or prep work.

The lack of planning time was a huge issue for many of the teachers, which is common for all types of teachers. Luciana said:

> It's difficult because… I want these conversations to be rich, and I want to, you know, really, really delve into these issues and everything. But in order to develop those kinds of lesson plans, it takes an inordinate amount of time… that's not feasible. It's not going to happen. And nobody is doing it…So definitely that's kind of like the internal struggle that I have.

Ultimately, that meant relying on pre-existing resources and sometimes just doing a little bit less of the social justice work than she wanted.

Beyond planning, teachers have to find time to actually teach about social justice during class time. Rey explained the issue of class time:

> Squeezing it in is really tough because they do they pack stuff on. So we have mandatory things that we need to do. And to be honest, I will not do those things in order to do [social justice work]… if someone came in, I would get in trouble…

She was willing to risk getting ‘in trouble’ in order to bring social justice lessons to her students. There was simply too much to do. “There's not enough time in the day to do everything that we're asked to do,” she said. So, in the end, she had to make tough decisions about what to do

and what to skip. For Rey, social justice work is the most important thing: “I believe that this is the work. This is the heart of it. This is the most important thing.” So, she ends up prioritizing social justice lessons, “but it is at the sake of other things for sure.”

Like Rey, Virginia chose to prioritize social justice over other things in the classroom at times:

> …when my schedule was made, however many years ago as a second grade teacher, they didn't think we'd be talking about [social justice] in the classroom. So, you know, somethings always kind of got to give. I have to skip something that week to put these lessons in, but it's obviously worth it.

Teachers have to make these difficult decisions to determine what matters most and what should be cut. And of course, all teachers are making those decisions differently, which is yet another area where this work is not standardized in any way.

Supports

On the flip side of challenges, the teachers in this study talked a lot about the support they had in teaching about social justice. While some teachers had more support than others, they all were able to point to some level of support that helped them do the work.

School and administrator support: “This is what we believe in”

One of the most important elements of a teacher feeling supported in this study was whether they felt supported by their administrators. Whether the administrators have their back makes a huge difference on how comfortable teachers feel bringing social justice to the classroom. Taylor shared:

> Admin has been really spectacular. And I've gone to several conferences and spoken to other teachers, and I'm well aware that not everybody is getting not only the support but the motivation… Admin has been very strong in their stance, and so I'm grateful for that.

Taylor is not only backed up by her admin when she teaches about social justice in the classroom, but they are actively encouraging her to learn more and engage in professional development related to social justice.

Ruby also was supported by her administrators and entire school community. In fact, they integrated social justice work into their school culture. Ruby shared "It's kind of a non-negotiable part of our education, our curriculum… we integrate in every aspect of the day…across just across the curriculum… So we have a kind of common language." This common language allows teachers to work together and fall back on school support if they face any pushback or challenges from families. When it came to families threatening to pull their students out of the school regarding issues of social justice, "the message from the school is like, 'okay, bye,'" she shared. That level of support ensured that she felt supported and safe in teaching about social justice in her classroom.

It is likely that the teachers in this study are more likely to have administrative support for social justice efforts than average teachers. It may be that the support has allowed them to do the work, which they otherwise might not do, or it could be that these teachers were seeking a supportive school environment in the first place. Either way, the fact that the majority of these teachers had administrative support for social justice efforts is likely not typical of most educators in the United States.

That being said, even those with admin support didn't always have what they considered to be full support. For example, when asked if administrators had been supportive of her social justice efforts, Jade said, "yes and no." She elaborated to say that she felt supported as long as she stayed "in a certain lane." That is, if she didn't push the work too far, the administrators would support her.

Jolene had a similar experience. She worked hard to identify only schools that were committed to social justice, and she was extremely honest about her plans to teach about social justice during the interview process. Still, the school wasn't as supportive as she expected. She spoke in the interview about her teaching philosophy and the past social justice work she had done. The school claimed to be on board with it, and they hired her. But, as her first year went on, she realized that they weren't as on board with it as they had made it seem. This difference in what administrators say compared to what they actually want was quite common. Jade's experience was similar. Her school wanted to put together resources for Black History Month, but when it came to covering Black Lives Matter or the experiences of Black trans people, "I was told we're not ready for this yet." Luciana saw the same issue at a past school that claimed to be all about social justice, but didn't actually allow the freedom to tackle justice in the classroom:

> And interestingly enough, the charter school that I taught at was like rooted in social justice philosophy as… they defined it themselves. But it was really difficult to, for us to come up with our own lessons and execute them in the classroom. They were very strict about what they wanted to be taught in the classrooms.

Luckily, Luciana was able to find another school that actually supported her work, and she said, "At the school where I'm at now, there's a lot of leeway, a lot of freedom for me to move around and just make the decisions that I have to make as the teacher." That freedom allows her to teach about social justice, knowing full well that the administrators will support her.

Administrative support can also change over time, depending on outside factors and changing administrators. Samantha saw her school go from not very supportive of social justice efforts to extremely supportive. The school had "gotten to the point where it was like, this [social justice] is what our school is going to be about, and this is what we believe in." They started changing policies and practices, and those who disagreed with it left. Ultimately though, that principal was pushed out, and a new principal came in. That principal reversed some of the

policies and brought back some of the practices that were harming students. "It broke my heart," Samantha said. In a matter of a few years, she watched her school go from less supportive, to more supportive, and back to less supportive.

Administrative support can make or break a teacher's experience when it comes to teaching about social justice. It's the difference between feeling like you're going to get fired for what you're teaching, compared to being supported, acknowledged, and appreciated for what you're teaching. Rey shared that a parent tried to get her fired once for what she was teaching, but her district stood behind her and had her back. If she'd been in a different district, she could have lost her job. The magnitude of administrative support is that significant, and it can make all the difference for teachers.

Parent support: "Parents are pretty into it"

Another source of support came from the parents themselves. The teachers had a lot of fear about parent pushback, which sometimes was a reality, but for the most part, the teachers reported that parents supported their social justice efforts. Rey said:

> I think parents are pretty into it for the most part. I can't imagine them wanting me to teach, like to use books like Cinderella…. I've gotten a lot of positive feedback over the years about the books that I read and the content in my room from parents. It is 98% positive.

Sometimes, support came from parents when teachers were expecting it, like Mary teaching students of color about race in empowering ways. She shared:

> I've only taught in like Black and brown communities, so like they love that I'm teaching their kids like real history, and like history that comes from a place of empowerment, resilience, resistance, and strength, rather than like, just like sob stories about how awful it is to be a person of color… So they [parents] actually really typically enjoy it, and I usually get positive feedback.

A number of parents appreciated that their children or their families were represented in the classroom, sometimes for the first time. Virginia told a story of a parent who thanked her for using a book about a transgender child. Virginia's student had a sibling who was transgender, and that student's mother shared that her child "really saw her sibling in that story." Luciana had a similar experience when parents were really excited that she was allowing students to speak in Spanish in her class, and even reading books in Spanish sometimes. The parents appreciated that their culture was being represented in the classroom.

Other times, family support came from parents that teachers thought might not support the social justice work. For example, Jolene shared a story of a parent who she thought might not support it because of their cultural and religious backgrounds:

> And [the parent] actually was sitting there talking to me about… 'next year I think it would be really helpful if you told a story about someone who was born a boy, and then as they got older, they realized that they were a girl.' … It was really interesting to see the support that came from parents that maybe I didn't think would support it.

This kind of support from parents showed the teachers that some parents were supporting them even when they least expected it, and even when they weren't vocalizing that support on a regular basis. Having conversations like this motivated them even more to continue the work because they realized how much of an impact it was having, even when they didn't see that impact all the time.

Social media and educator communities: "That was all because of Instagram"

Although some of the teachers were hesitant and a little embarrassed to admit it, many of them found support in online educator communities, primarily based on social media sites like Instagram. Tessa said, "as silly as it sounds… I learned a lot from Instagram." Many of the

teachers also acknowledged that it seemed silly, but they admitted they connected with and learned from other social justice educators online.

Penny follows specific accounts to find resources and book recommendations to cover topics of social justice. A specific influencer she follows will provide resources, and Penny said: "every month she'll put out books… that you should have in your classroom. And I mean, I hit them up so hard for resource ideas." When asked about where she finds resources, Jade said, "Sadly, social media, like looking on Instagram." The community of social justice educators built on Instagram was strong enough that six of the 17 teachers that I spoke with specifically mentioned Instagram as a resource.

Many of the teachers in the study seemed disappointed that they had to rely on a social media platform like Instagram to get the resources they needed and wanted to develop as social justice educators. Of course, if these resources were more widely available through professional development or from schools themselves, the teachers wouldn't need to do all this searching online. That being said, it makes perfect sense that teachers would find it incredibly helpful to connect with others who are teaching social justice, and it makes sense that social media platforms facilitate that sense of community. Since most teachers aren't engaging in social justice work, many educators can't turn to other members of their school community to share resources, ideas, or support.

While social media may not be the ideal platform to be used as a resource hub for teachers, many of the teachers did feel like using social media in that way made them better social justice educators. Mary shared:

> I sought out experts mostly on like… really people who knew what they were talking about, mostly on like Teacher Gram [Instagram]. That was really helpful. And now I think I'm a lot better [at] like doing LGBTQ literature and discussions.

She went on to say that using platforms like social media gave teachers a space to inspire each other to do this work. Madonna also talked about how helpful social media platforms were for her journey as a social justice educator:

> Because it gave us the opportunity to have the resources that we needed…And that was all because of Instagram, really. And so that was helpful for me to jump start that kind of education. For my students and for me.

This acknowledgement is important for teachers who otherwise wouldn't have access to resources for learning how to teach about social justice. By connecting online, they have access to new ideas, suggestions, and even lesson plans created by other teachers. Many of these online social justice educators give away or sell social justice curriculum and lesson plans for teachers to use. Many of the teachers in this study submitted lesson plans from online educators as part of the resources they submitted for this study to demonstrate how they teach about social justice. As with anything on the internet, this of course presents a huge challenge because the quality of the resources likely vary significantly. That being said, teachers appreciated having access to any resources online, rather than the alternative which would have been to create all the resources on their own.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

In this dissertation, I described the experiences of early elementary school teachers who are teaching their students about social justice. I used Dover's (2013) framework for teaching for social justice, which includes a variety of theoretical and conceptual approaches to teaching for and about social justice. The teachers shared stories of their methods, motivations, struggles, and supports as educators for social justice. Their stories are uplifting, inspiring, and at times, heartbreaking. Their experiences shine light on what an education system rooted in educating good human beings could look like, and the challenges of doing this work within the existing system.

The findings demonstrated that while teachers are doing this work, they are doing so without much support and are facing difficult challenges. These challenges are likely insurmountable for many early elementary school educators who would like to do this work. The teachers in this study had some level of support, usually from administrators at their school, that allowed them to do the work. Many teachers in the United States simply don't have that support, and without it, overcoming the challenges of teaching about social justice with young children likely feels insurmountable. Even with support, the teachers in this study were forced to pave the path while they walked it, as there is no clear curriculum or framework for what it means to teach about social justice.

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings when considered in relation to Dover's (2013) framework for social justice education and the existing literature on social justice education. I also discuss key takeaways and implications of this work for policy and practice. Finally, I suggest questions and research methods for approaching future research on this topic.

Discussion

I conducted a qualitative study of early elementary school teachers who are teaching their young students about social justice. I focused on early elementary school because most of the existing literature on social justice education is conducted at the high school or higher education level, and there is little support or research to demonstrate what is happening in elementary schools. Early elementary school (K-2nd grade) is particularly difficult, as they represent our youngest learners. When it comes to the topic of social justice, age and developmental appropriateness is a significant factor that holds teachers back from engaging in these topics.

I worked directly with teachers in this study because they are the closest to this work. They are the people who interact with children every single day, who plan the lessons they want to cover, and who have to respond to all of the social justice-related topics that come up on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. While administrators may be able to tell me what their policy and vision for social justice education looks like, teachers have the insight that comes from grappling with this work day in and day out. They are the experts on the topic of teaching about social justice, and for that reason, their perspectives are centered in this work.

I spoke with 17 teachers, and I spoke with each teacher for 45-90 minutes. I also requested to see examples of materials that demonstrated how they were teaching about social justice in their classrooms. In these interviews, they shared their motivations for teaching about social justice, which often included personal experiences, politicized events, or teaching training programs. They shared their goals, methods, and approaches to planning lessons about social justice. They shared their fears and anxieties, which were extremely common, about what backlash they could face, and they shared why they felt they had no choice but to do it anyway. The teachers told stories of students, friends, family members, and colleagues who inspired

them, and they shared stories of colleagues and community members who lashed out at them. One teacher even received death threats for speaking up publicly about teaching kids about social justice.

Their stories were incredibly uplifting, demonstrating the level of commitment that these teachers had to doing the right thing for their students. They were inspiring, as they showed a glimpse into what the future of education could look like if it were focused on raising good humans who will recognize oppression and fight for justice. And their stories were heartbreaking: when they told me about transgender students who faced hatred and discrimination from adults in their community; when they talked about the fear of losing their jobs for teaching kids to value their own identities; when they shared stories of young people who were taken out of school because white parents couldn't stand the thought of them learning about racism from a Black woman; when they talked about learning resources being taken away from kids because of state fear that has resulted in a backlash of banned books and laws against teaching certain truths. They told me how these things impacted them and their students. These are the stories that are missing from the literature. These stories are the realities that social justice educators are facing every day.

Existing Literature

The existing literature on social justice education is limited, at best, and when it comes to elementary school, it is extremely limited. Exactly the way the teachers in this study struggled to define what social justice education really means, researchers have struggled to find a common definition for social justice in education. Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) suggested that social justice in education has become a catchphrase for "anything and everything" (p. 627), and frankly, some of the teachers in this study seemed to believe that as well.

In this research, I focused on teaching early elementary school students about issues of social justice, such as race, gender, socioeconomic identity, disability, and environmental sustainability. When the teachers veered away from that, into "anything and everything" territory, I tried to bring them back. Topics that came up included general history and social studies lessons, issues related to teaching English as a second language, and issues of integrating students with disabilities into classrooms. While these topics are important, it was clear (and understandable) that the teachers didn't have a very firm definition of what constituted teaching *about* social justice and what did not. If researchers, who have the luxury of time to theorize on these topics, can't seem to come to a clear cut definition, it's no surprise that teachers, who are consistently pulled in multiple directions and strapped for time, would not have come to such a definition either.

Bell (2016) offers a useful definition, which framed my thinking for this research about what social justice education actually means:

> The goal of social justice education is to enable individuals to develop critical analytical tools necessary to understand the structural features of oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems. Social justice education aims to help participants develop awareness, knowledge, and processes to examine issues of justice/injustice in their personal lives, communities, institutions, and the broader society. It also aims to connect analysis to action; to help participants develop a sense of agency and commitment, as well as skills and tools, for working with others to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p.4)

This definition brings together different philosophies and pedagogies of social justice education, while also focusing on teaching *about* issues of justice. Ultimately, this is the goal for any social justice educator. It prioritizes giving students the skills they need to recognize and analyze justice and injustice through looking at real social justice issues that impact the world around them.

Dover's Dimensions of Teaching for Social Justice

To frame this research, I used Dover (2013)'s Dimensions of Teaching for Social Justice, which draw on five conceptual and pedagogical philosophies of teaching for social justice. These five philosophies are: democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, culturally responsive education, and social justice education (Dover, 2013). By drawing upon these five foundations, we are able to create a more robust understanding of what it means to teach about social justice

In this study, I focused on how the teachers taught *about* social justice rather than *for* social justice. This distinction is important because teaching *for* social justice often relies on policies and practices that are rooted in justice, and most of the existing research on social justice education lies in this realm. It is undoubtedly vital that any teacher who claims to care about justice practices their teaching in a way that is rooted in social justice, or in other words, educating *for* social justice. However, it is also important that young people have the opportunity to actually learn *about* social justice.

An education *for* social justice will likely result in young people who are affirmed, challenged, treated fairly, and ultimately have the chance to reach their own fullest potential in life. An education that teaches *about* social justice, on the other hand, will likely result in young people who seek justice, for themselves and others, and pursue a life that is rooted in activism, good citizenship, and genuine caring for creating a better world. Both approaches are necessary for creating an educational experience that is truly based in social justice. In this study, we focus on teaching *about* social justice, as this is the piece that is most often missing from the conversation.

Teaching about social justice means teaching kids about issues that impact people, animals, and the planet in ways that are unjust. That is, teaching students about the social, historical, cultural, and political movements towards a more just and equitable society. This is a piece of the center of Dover's framework (Dover, 2009). See Figure 27 for a reminder of this framework.

Figure 27

Conceptual and Pedagogical Foundations of Teaching for Social Justice (Dover, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, the teachers in this study spoke about methods and approaches that fell into all of the dimensions of teaching for social justice. At various times, they talked about and shared activities and lessons that were rooted in culturally responsive education, multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and democratic education. It seemed, in their minds, that these were all interchangeable for social justice. This makes sense, as educators likely wouldn't always be up-to-date on the key terms and distinctions used in research to distinguish between concepts that, on the surface, are quite similar. However, this lack of distinction demonstrates that teachers may not always know exactly what it means to teach about social justice, or have a nuanced idea of how to do so.

These frameworks are important for understanding how this work shows up, though it may never be important for teachers to distinguish the difference between democratic education and multicultural education *if* that teacher is using a holistic strategy for teaching for social

justice that includes all of the important elements. However, the teachers in this study were often haphazardly piecing together various lessons and ideas in order to create a cohesive learning experience for the students. Because of that, some teachers were heavily focused on multicultural education, for example, which is a piece of teaching about social justice, but alone does not reach our definition of teaching about social justice. If teachers had a holistic approach for teaching *about* social justice, the distinctions in name between the theoretical and pedagogical approaches would become less important. As long as they are piecing together the work on their own, often with little outside support besides social media, teachers who seek to teach about social justice will likely miss some of the important elements because they aren't familiar with these dimensions (or any other holistic framework) of teaching for social justice.

Theory-to-Practice Disconnect

Perhaps the most important takeaway, which showed up in the interviews and in the literature, was that these nuances are extremely difficult to tease out. Yet, they matter. For the sake of this research, I was focused on how teachers teach about social justice. However, it was abundantly clear that the lines are fuzzy at best between the different approaches and perspectives on what it means to teach for and about social justice. There are not yet defined boundaries between the various approaches in this field of work, either in the literature or in practice. This matters because teachers aren't taking a holistic approach, so while some kids with a social justice teacher are getting a multicultural education, other kids with a social justice teacher are getting a critical education. Still other students may be getting both, or something else entirely.

All of these different types of education are unique in how they think about social justice and education, and those distinctions matter. Some approaches focus on critical thinking, while

others center on diversity, and still others focus on community action. However, they all share the common thread that they seek to transform the way we think about education to be more inclusive, diverse, and rooted in justice. In this study, I looked at the ways educators are able to take these concepts, which have been highly theorized, and put them into action in their classrooms.

Distinctions in the literature matter for the sake of research, but it seems that they don't really matter to educators who are actually doing this work day in and day out. There is an established gap between theory and practice when it comes to multicultural education (Gay, 1995). Gay (1995) stated that the "theoretical development is far out-stripping its practical development" (p. 4) when it came to multicultural education. It would appear that not much has changed since that article urged for a more practical approach to social justice education in general nearly three decades ago. Today, we as researchers are still seeking to close the theory-practice gap in social justice education (Kavanagh, 2022), and that was obvious from the teachers in this study. Luciana called it out directly in her interview when she was talking about what she learned in academia compared to when she actually showed up in her classroom. "Definitely that theory to practice disconnect was hard," she said. She explained how she had a lot of ideas of how social justice education should work, but the reality of managing a classroom of elementary school kids was different (and much more difficult) in practice than it was in theory.

All this theorizing may have value in its own right for many researchers and academics. However, I pursued this work because I care deeply about how it actually impacts educators and students in classrooms. There is value in research for research's sake, but for this study, my goal is practicality. The existence of this theory-to-practice gap indicates to me that we need to draw

teachers and students more into our work as researchers if we ever hope to produce meaningful change in schools. To get this right, we need to be closer to schools, closer to teachers, and closer to students if we're going to be talking about social justice education. Research should center the voices of those who really understand what is happening, and that is the teachers, the students, and even administrators and others who work directly in schools. It has been three decades since Gay (1995) called out the theoretical development of social justice education compared to the practical development of it in the classroom. It would appear, from this study and from existing literature, that little has changed in that time period.

Implications

There is much to learn from the experiences of the 17 teachers in this study. Each one of them has a unique context and brings a different perspective to the research. However, there are a few key implications that can be drawn from across their experiences. These implications demonstrate some of the issues when it comes to teaching about social justice and what can be done to make this work accessible for more early elementary educators.

No clarity

One of the most consistent findings throughout this study was that there is very little clarity when it comes to social justice education. The first research question asked what the meaning of social justice education was, and I found no common definition, either from the participants or the literature. The second research question asked how teachers are teaching about social justice, and for that, too, I found no common standards.

The teachers all had different definitions of what it means to be a social justice educator. This is expected for a topic that is so fraught with political charge, social impact, and personal

experience, but it also makes it difficult for teachers to get into this work if they aren't sure where to start. Even if a teacher has a desire to teach about social justice, without support and resources, they are unlikely to be able to do so, and if they try, it is likely they may not do it well. Many of the teachers in the study admitted that when they started teaching social justice, they did not know what they were doing, and in some cases, they were doing activities that they now know were likely more harmful than helpful.

Many of the teachers spoke about how there is no curriculum to use. Each of the teachers in the study approached the work differently, using their own experience, personal research, their students' experience, and resources that were typically found online. They pieced these things together to create a cohesive learning experience for their students, but the outcome looked significantly different for each of the teachers.

While many of the teachers used the *Learning for Justice* Social Justice Standards, and these standards are certainly helpful in determining the intended outcomes for students, they provide little support for an educator who does not know how to go about producing that outcome. Without some kind of lesson plan guide or curriculum, these standards provide an end goal with no plan of how to get there. Certainly, teachers are trained to create curriculum and lesson plans, but when it comes to social justice, most people, including teachers, are not experts on this topic. To expect teachers to become content experts on all areas of justice, develop lesson plans that align with the standards, and teach their students this alongside their day-to-day subject lessons is simply unrealistic.

Without clarity around what it means to teach about social justice and what that teaching should look like, there is unlikely to be a large-scale move towards teaching for justice. Researchers and educators need to consider what it means to teach about social justice, which is

different but just as complex as teaching for social justice. What does an educator who teaches about social justice do? What does teaching about social justice look like? Where does an educator start if they want to teach about social justice? This study begins to demonstrate the various ways that social justice educators are already doing this work, and these examples are a great starting point for educators looking to start teaching their young students about social justice. However, more examples and guidelines are needed if education hopes to move towards a meaningful social justice learning experience for all students.

A reason to do this work

Every single teacher in this study had a reason to be doing this work. Whether it was personal experience, a political awakening, school policy, or a social justice-focused teacher training program, each educator had a reason to teach about social justice. This can be considered a good thing, as their reason to do the work likely gave them motivation to start. However, the reality is that most teachers don't have a reason to teach about social justice. And considering all the challenges that have to be overcome to do it, not having a strong reason to do the work is going to derail the majority of potential social justice educators.

Educators must have a reason to bring social justice into their classroom. Some of the reasons the teachers in this study started the work were personal or political. For example, some teachers talked about growing up with an oppressed identity, and how much they wanted to make sure their students never felt unseen in the classroom. Others talked about how the murder of George Floyd and the resulting racial uprising made them realize that they needed to be teaching about justice in the classroom. Since personal experience and political trigger events are difficult to control or incite, researchers and educators should focus on the two other reasons that teachers

chose to teach about social justice: either their school wanted to focus on it or their teacher training program focused on it.

Teacher training programs have a powerful potential impact in this space. The teachers in this study who came from social justice-focused training programs all started out teaching about social justice in their first year, even if they admitted they still weren't very good at it at the time. Most of the teachers who did not go to a social justice-focused training program did not start teaching about social justice in their first year, and for some it took many years before they started. If more teacher training programs trained teacher candidates how to teach about social justice, we will have more educators coming into our schools with the tools and knowledge to do this work. Those educators are likely to go on to influence others in their schools. Many of the teachers in this study were asked by their schools to lead diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) groups or programs, write social justice plans for other educators to use, or even come into other classrooms to teach lessons about justice. All of this work will help bring other teachers who were not trained in social justice education into the space of potentially becoming a social justice educator themselves.

Some teachers came to the work not through their teacher training program, but through professional development or other school requirements. In this case, the school provided learning experiences about social justice or encouraged teaching about social justice in some way. If more schools start to make a push to focus on social justice, more educators will have the opportunity to get on board with the work. In this case, though, it's important that teachers have resources and tools to do the work effectively, rather than just a mandate to teach about social justice. There are a number of good professional development opportunities that teachers talked about,

and more will be needed to provide educators with not only a push to get into this work, but the resources needed to do it well.

School support

Schools offering some kind of training program or professional development related to social justice would send the message to educators that they are supported in this work. For so many teachers in this study, support from administrators made all the difference in feeling safe teaching about social justice. The teachers who had administrative support were able to do the work more confidently, knowing that their administrators would back them up if there was ever a problem or a complaint. Teachers without that support, on the other hand, were forced to "squeeze it in" or "close the door" so to speak, sometimes literally, when it came to social justice. They were hiding what they were doing, moving around their schedule to fit it in, and using their own personal time to create plans.

For fostering social justice education, one of the best things that administrators in schools can do is make a decision to publicly support social justice efforts. This will send a message to families about what is important, bring forward any conversations and disagreements that need to happen, and give teachers the freedom they need to do their jobs well without fear of backlash. When more schools start openly showing support for social justice, more teachers will be able to bring this work into the classroom for students.

A social justice curriculum

One of the greatest challenges that the teachers in this study faced was the lack of social justice curriculum. They were piecing together resources from educators on Instagram, books, and their own ideas. This haphazard nature of the work meant that the quality of materials varied

significantly between teachers. It also meant that teachers did much worse work at the beginning of their tenure, or at the beginning of their teaching about social justice, than they're doing now. It stands to reason that their work will continue to improve, and years down the line their social justice work will be better than it is today. While this is the nature of learning and getting better as a teacher, a curriculum to follow, or at minimum a guide, would help teachers move through that learning curve much more quickly. This would mean more students would get a better quality education right away.

A social justice curriculum, which includes lesson plans and activities, is needed for teachers to really get into this work. That curriculum would have to be aligned to academic standards, such as the Common Core, to ensure that teachers have time and can fit it seamlessly into the work they're already doing. It would also have to be flexible. While having the resources available is important, social justice educators must be able to make their content relevant and fun for their group of students. That will look different depending on the students' background knowledge, interests, identities, and experiences. While a curriculum is needed, there will be no one-size-fits-all learning plan that works for every classroom when it comes to social justice. Educators have to keep in mind a number of factors, including how their administrators and students' families will respond to the content, their students' identities, and the community they are in. Therefore, a flexible, standards-aligned curriculum is needed to make this work easier and more streamlined for educators and students.

Future Research Directions

This was an exploratory study to start to see how K-2nd grade teachers are bringing social justice into their classrooms. However, there is much more research that needs to be done to truly understand how teachers are bringing social justice content to their early elementary

school students. In this research, I worked with 17 teachers who self-described as teaching their students about issues of social justice. There are a number of limitations to this study that need to be addressed in future research. First, this research includes 17 teachers, so it represents a limited number of perspectives of teachers who are doing this work. They also self-identified as teaching about social justice, so the extent to which teachers were bringing justice into the classroom was different between the teachers. While all the teachers were working towards justice in their classroom and teaching students about social justice in some ways, it varied significantly from teacher to teacher. A deeper dive into how teachers are defining social justice and how that impacts the ways they teach about it in the classroom is necessary. Future research could find teachers who are bringing social justice into their classrooms in very deep and significant ways, for example, and that would represent a different subset of educators who are teaching about social justice.

In addition, future research should seek to hear from more teachers, so a survey study would help to provide a wider range and more breadth of understanding of how teachers are doing this work. This would allow exploration of how teachers do this work at different grade levels, in different school types, with different student and teacher demographics, and in different regions of the country. All of these factors are important when considering why and how teachers are bringing social justice into their classrooms, as well as how more teachers could bring social justice to their work. Research is needed in each area to really understand how context impacts social justice education.

While centering teacher voices was extremely important to me in this study, it's equally important to hear from students when it comes to any educational initiative. Future research should center the voices of students who have learned about social justice from their teachers.

These students will offer valuable insights into the meaning, purpose, and impact of teaching about social justice from the perspective of the learners. Students would be able to speak to their experience with learning about social justice, which will inevitably be different from the experience of teachers.

Additional research should also look at how teaching about social justice impacts student performance and engagement in school. While there is some research that demonstrates a positive impact on students (Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2002), much more is needed to demonstrate the value, beyond the important ethical and moral considerations, of teaching students about social justice.

Finally, curriculum research is needed to determine what a social justice curriculum could or should look like. While it became clear in this study that a social justice curriculum and guidelines are needed, it was not clear what that curriculum should include. Future research should study how teachers are doing this work, what lessons they are using, and how it could be brought together into a cohesive learning plan for various grade levels.

Educating Good Humans

It is important to remember why this work matters. In recent years, the public has become concerned with the issue of teaching about social justice, which has caused major backlash to the work. At least 42 states have introduced bills or other measures that would limit or ban the ways that teachers can talk about race, racism, or sexism in the classroom (Education Week, 2022), and at least 17 states have actually imposed these bans (Schwartz, 2022). Race, racism, and sexism are not the only justice issues that have been targeted. At least 15 states have proposed

laws that would “affect ways of discussing, addressing, or interacting with LGBTQ youth in schools" (Sawchuk, 2022).

These laws are representative of a mindset that does not prioritize valuing student identities in the classroom. Young people deserve to see their own identities and their families’ identities represented in the books they read, the media they consume, and the lessons they learn at school. This movement towards banning certain aspects of social justice education is also limiting students’ exposure to diversity and learning about people who are different from them. Even if a certain student feels represented in the classroom, for example a white male student when it comes to race and gender, that student may not be exposed to learning about those who are different from him. These kinds of lessons would enrich their educational experience and help them develop empathy and critical thinking skills.

However, there are no standards for what social justice education looks like. This matters because issues of social justice can bring up difficult emotions and feelings for kids, and it’s important that the work is done in ways that are developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive. More research is needed in order to understand how this work is being done, how it should be done, and what social justice education could look like on a wide scale for elementary school students.

As researchers and educators, we should be concerned with what students are learning in school and why. Our education system must have roots in justice if we want to raise kind, caring citizens with strong critical thinking skills and an ability to positively impact the world around them. While core subjects will always be important, it is as important that the education system helps to raise good human beings. When kids have the chance to learn about issues of social justice, they have their own identities validated and they learn to see injustices in the world. This

allows them to see how they have a place in solving some of the world's greatest and most pressing challenges.

To close this dissertation, I will circle back to our reasons for doing it. What kind of young people do we hope will come out of our education systems? How do we hope schools will make kids feel, both about themselves and about the world around them? In what ways should kids learn to be part of the world around them in a meaningful way? How do we hope our children will react when they see injustice in the world? What kind of people do we want our youth to aspire to become? These questions are worth asking for anybody who works in the world of education, and I believe that an education that is rooted in social justice will help answer them in a way that will make the world better for all of us. Our future is in the hands of our youngest citizens. Let's give them the tools to make it better.

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Interview introduction:

Thank you for allowing me to interview you. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and you are welcome to stop at any point. You are not required to answer any of the questions. If you want anything you have said taken off the record, please just let me know. If it is okay with you, I will be recording this conversation to make sure I remember correctly what you all said. The recordings will not be shared. My goal is to understand your experience as an early elementary school teacher who is teaching about social justice in the classroom.

Interview questions:

- Tell me about the school you teach at and your students.
- What grade level do you teach? How long have you been teaching?
- What made you want to become a teacher?
- Why do you teach about topics of social justice in your classroom?
- What kinds of social justice issues have you taught about in your classroom?
- How do you approach teaching about social justice in your classroom?
- What challenges, if any, do you face in teaching about social justice in your classroom?
- What support, if any, have you received with teaching about social justice in your classroom?
- Can you tell me about the educational material samples you submitted? Walk me through how you used those in the classroom. Are these similar to other tools, projects, or resources you use?
- What does it mean to you to be a social justice educator?

Interview conclusion:

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. If you have any additional questions about the research, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at any time.

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