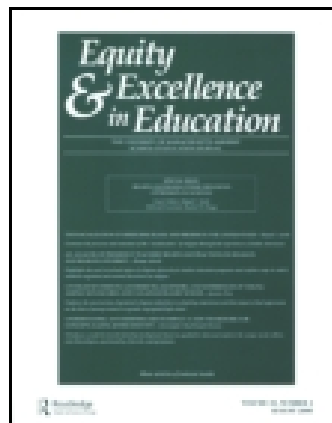


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"Promoting Acceptance" or "Preparing Warrior Scholars": Variance in Teaching for Social Justice Vision and Praxis

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“Promoting Acceptance” or “Preparing Warrior Scholars”: Variance in Teaching for Social Justice Vision and Praxis

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A growing body of research explores theoretical models of teaching for social justice in P-12 classrooms and in teacher education. However, many of these models fail to account for the relationship between teachers’ social justice frameworks and their classroom practices. In this article, I use vignettes drawn from a recent study of secondary English Language Arts teachers to illustrate how differences in social location and sociopolitical emphasis affect teachers’ approaches to justice-oriented curriculum, pedagogy, and social action. This article concludes with implications for teaching and teacher education, including strategies for using these findings in preservice classrooms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In 2006, the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education, or NCATE (now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP]), removed social justice as an explicit indicator for evaluating teacher candidates’ dispositions, claiming that a social justice orientation was implied within standards related to diversity (Alsup & Miller, 2014). This decision reflects persistent controversies about the multiple meanings of social justice in education (see Hytten & Bettez, 2011; North, 2006, 2008), strategies of assessing candidates’ social justice dispositions (Alsup & Miller, 2014), and the impact of candidates’ social justice philosophies on their classroom practices (Agarwal, 2011; Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2010; Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Shakman, & Terrell, 2009; Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009). Moreover, these controversies fuel critics’ attempts to portray teaching for social justice as under-theorized, frustrate teacher educators’ attempts to prepare candidates to enact social justice in their classrooms, and limit researchers’ abilities to evaluate the impact of teaching for social justice on P-12 student outcomes (Cochran-Smith, Barnatt et al., 2009; Cochran-Smith, Shakman et al., 2009; Dover, 2009; Grant & Agosto, 2008).

Multiple researchers, including myself, have attempted to address the “ambiguity critiques” (Cochran-Smith, Barnatt et al., 2009, p. 625) of teaching for social justice by examining the philosophical, conceptual, and pedagogical frameworks that inform contemporary approaches to teaching for social justice (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2010; Dover, 2009, 2013b; Gorski, 2010; Grant & Agosto, 2008; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; North, 2006, 2008; Young, 2006). However, while there

is clear value in exploring how teachers and teacher educators conceptualize teaching for social justice, that understanding is of limited use without an analysis of its impact; that is, how teachers' social justice beliefs influence their work in the classroom.

This analysis is especially important in my own field of English Education, where recent revisions to the National Council for Teachers of English-NCATE (NCTE-NCATE) standards for initial preparation of teachers of English Language Arts reversed the 2006 redaction of the phrase social justice (Alsup & Miller, 2014). The new standards, approved in 2012, require teacher educators to evaluate candidates' knowledge of social justice theory and ability to translate that knowledge into instruction that "promotes social justice and critical engagement with complex issues related to maintaining a diverse, inclusive, equitable society" (NCTE, 2012, p. 2). While a growing number of teacher educators have published their strategies for engaging candidates in social justice theorizing (e.g., Alsup & Miller, 2014; Bieler, 2012), research also suggests that even those candidates with strong social justice orientations struggle to enact those visions once they enter the classroom (see Agarwal, 2011; Agarwal et al., 2010; Cochran-Smith, Shakman et al., 2009; Dover, 2013a; Picower, 2011).

The purpose of this article, therefore, is not to conclusively resolve the debate over the definition of teaching for social justice, but rather to examine its praxis: How do teachers' theories about teaching for social justice inform their classroom approaches, and how do teachers' classroom contexts shape their approach to social justice? To explore these questions, I will highlight two vignettes drawn from a recent, multi-state study examining how teachers, and specifically secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, conceptualize and implement teaching for social justice in standards-based classrooms. After presenting and analyzing the vignettes, I propose a framework for characterizing teachers' approaches to teaching for social justice and offer strategies for using this data to guide candidates in preparing to implement their vision of teaching for social justice in their own school sites.

METHODS

As a former urban ELA teacher who taught for social justice in a relatively under-resourced and standards-driven context, I sought to design a study that highlighted teachers' curricular creativity and expertise, addressed the contextual nature of teaching for social justice (see Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 1999, 2004), and responded to the imperative to make the core principles of the practice concrete (Grant & Agosto, 2008). I advertised the study as an opportunity for teachers to share their approach to teaching for social justice in standards-based, secondary English Language Arts classrooms, and used my insider status to conduct targeted sampling via local, regional, and national organizations, conferences, and listservs, including those related to teaching in general, teaching ELA specifically, and teaching for social justice. Participating teachers were invited to recommend colleagues for the study; however, no two participants taught at the same school. Additionally, since one of my goals was to better understand how teachers conceptualize teaching for social justice in standards-based contexts, all participants who self-identified as doing so were considered eligible for this study; I did not vet participants according to my own social justice frameworks.

Participating teachers first responded to an open-ended questionnaire regarding their definition of "teaching for social justice," local accountability mandates, their approach to balancing teaching

for social justice with those mandates, and any challenges they faced while doing so. Next, participants submitted and analyzed an original lesson or unit plan that they considered an example of teaching for social justice. By focusing on participants' written curriculum, and their analysis of their own curriculum, I was able to assess their beliefs and priorities relative to a social justice curriculum, as well as how their curriculum addressed state and federal content standards.

Data analysis methods integrated constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007) and curriculum analysis (Audet & Jordan, 2003). I selected these research methods for their descriptive and inductive nature, as well as for their ability to simultaneously address both the contextual nature of teaching for social justice and the curricular focus of my research questions. Specifically, I used constant-comparative and open-coding protocols (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007) to identify central themes in participants' descriptions of teaching for social justice; I then wrote memos exploring emergent trends in the data, and employed theoretical sampling to elaborate and refine categories (Charmaz, 2006). I also used lesson plan analysis protocols (Audet & Jordan, 2003) to examine how submitted curriculum operationalized social justice and ELA topics, pedagogical strategies, and curricular standards; these protocols included the line-by-line analysis of submitted curriculum, followed by open and focused coding processes to evaluate their ELA and social justice emphases.

The study from which the data presented in this article is drawn enrolled 24 secondary ELA teachers, representing 13 states. These teachers had between 1 and 38 years of experience, with a median of 6.5 years and a mean of 8.4 years of experience teaching ELA. Most participants were white (84%) and female (84%), a profile that reflects that of the teaching population at large: nationally, 85% of teachers are white and 82% are female (National Center for Education Information; NCEI, 2011). Five teachers (21%) identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; three (13%) as people with disabilities. Nineteen participants (79%) taught in urban schools, one (4%) taught in a suburban school, three (13%) taught in small towns, and three (13%) taught in rural schools; approximately two-thirds (63%) of the teachers taught in schools where most students (> 60%) are students of color, while one third (33%) taught in schools where most students are white. Additional demographic features analyzed included teachers' religion, childhood socioeconomic class, geographic and linguistic background, and school context.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Based on my analysis, I developed a theoretical model for teaching for social justice that has three primary dimensions: curriculum, pedagogy, and social action (Dover, 2013b). Specifically, according to participants, teaching for social justice includes curriculum that (a) reflects students' personal and cultural identities, (b) includes explicit instruction about oppression, prejudice, and inequity, and (c) makes connections between curricular standards and social justice topics. Second, teaching for social justice employs pedagogy that (a) creates a supportive classroom climate that embraces multiple perspectives, (b) emphasizes critical thinking and inquiry, and (c) promotes students' academic, civic, and personal growth. Third, teaching for social justice makes connections between education and social action through (a) teachers sense of themselves as social activists, (b) teachers' intent to raise students' awareness of inequity and injustice, and (c) teachers' intent to promote students' social action. See Dover (2013b) for a comprehensive

analysis of this model, including an examination of the conceptual and pedagogical foundations that may have influenced participants' constructions of teaching for social justice.

Moreover, as educators bound by the current climate of accountability, participants saw the integration of social justice goals and content-area standards as a critical component of their approach. This was visible both in their stated definitions of practice and their thematically diverse, standards-based, and cognitively complex curriculum. Submitted curriculum was broad in scope, spanning British, American, and world literatures, as well as an array of social justice topics, including historical, contemporary, literary, and contextually-specific examples of race/racism, religion/religious oppression, gender/sexism, class/classism, sexual orientation/heterosexism, and activism. Additionally, although the initial data was collected before the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010), subsequent analysis revealed that submitted curriculum met—and, in some cases, surpassed—all the College and Career Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening and Language in grades 6–12 (Dover, 2014). For additional analysis of participants' curriculum, see Dover (2014); the remainder of this article focuses specifically on the sociopolitical variance in participants' constructions of teaching for social justice.

Varying Visions: Kathleen and Sharon

Despite the consistency in participants' reference to curricular, pedagogical, and social action oriented aspects of teaching for social justice, the data also revealed stark differences in how participants framed those themes within their broader sociopolitical contexts. Moreover, this variance in context and philosophical emphasis resulted in disparate curricular and pedagogical approaches. While these trends were visible across participants, they were especially dramatic in the case of Kathleen and Sharon, two teachers who both use the Holocaust memoir, *Night* (Wiesel & Wiesel, 2006), to engage students in the examination of societal oppression.

Kathleen

Kathleen is 27 years old, white, heterosexual, and has four years of experience teaching ninth grade ELA in a small town in southwestern Ohio. She initially learned about my study through a social justice oriented listserv for teachers, identifies as Lutheran, is middle class, and has never lived in the school district where she teaches. Most of Kathleen's students are white (99%), all speak English as a first language, and most are either working (40%) or middle (55%) class. When asked to define teaching for social justice in her own words, Kathleen described the practice as "teaching students to value everyone as equals regardless of their differences. My class theme is 'accepting others, accepting ourselves' so I would explain it in terms of this theme."

Kathleen's unit required her ninth grade students to compare *Night* to Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" (1983), watch a YouTube video related to the caged bird metaphor in the poem, and discuss personal examples of caged birds and their cages. At the conclusion of the unit, students wrote a paper analyzing the use of the metaphor in Angelou's poem, making specific references to both texts. Overall, the unit centered on textual analysis, imagery, and how historical context shapes the meaning of literature. In framing her unit, Kathleen said it addressed principles of teaching for social justice by engaging students in knowledge construction, examining the social

contexts of literature, bridging canonical literature and social justice topics, and asking students to examine oppression in literature and their lives.

Kathleen reported little difficulty reconciling her vision of teaching for social justice with the demands of standards-based instruction. In an explanation reflective of that of many participants, Kathleen noted that the ELA standards offer significant flexibility because they

address student abilities, not specific literature. Therefore, I am able to teach texts that relate to our class theme while still addressing the literacy abilities that the state expects students to have. I am able to structure writing prompts so they ask students to discuss social justice issues while still familiarizing them with [state standardized test] type questions.

For Kathleen, social justice topics were a vehicle for teaching English Language Arts content and skills; she determined her instructional goals and selected literature that allowed her to meet those goals while teaching towards her class theme. Kathleen experienced few difficulties attempting to design curriculum that served both of her purposes, but did note occasional resistance from students in her relatively homogenous classroom. Her curriculum, she said, “requires some students to question beliefs that have been instilled in them since childhood” leading them to “feel threatened when they realize their beliefs are prejudiced or racist.”

Sharon

Sharon is a 25-year-old Afro-Indigenous woman with three years of experience teaching secondary ELA, most recently in a social justice oriented charter school in southern California. Like Kathleen, she initially heard about my study on a social justice related listserv. Sharon is heterosexual, has no religious affiliation, was raised working class, and lives in the district where she teaches. While Sharon’s school is located in a predominantly white, Irish neighborhood, most of her students are bussed in from other parts of the city, and all are students of color, with 95% identifying as Raza and 5% as black or African. Sixty-five percent of her students are non-native English speakers; all are poor or working class.

Sharon’s definition of teaching for social justice was among the most explicitly politicized in the study:

Teaching for social justice requires us to recognize that the institution of schooling in the u.s. [sic] has historically been a product of colonization designed to indoctrinate all students with certain grand, dominant narratives that justify and reproduce the power, privilege, and dominance of a few at the expense of the majority. Because the purpose of schooling is to indoctrinate young people with these ideologies, as critical educators, it is our responsibility to help our students critically analyze how this plays out in their daily lives; what the social, personal, and material consequences are; and what their roles are in changing it. Teaching for social justice cannot simply mean helping students master federal and state content standards and preparing them for college. . . . Teaching for social justice means helping students master skills they need to not only be able to survive in this world, but reclaim it. It means preparing freedom fighting intellectuals who are committed to defending themselves, their families, and their communities from the attacks that come down on them every single day. It means preparing warrior scholars who use their critical and creative skills to envision a better world and begin to take action to materialize that world. In other words, teaching for social justice requires that we not only help students develop strong academic skills and literacies, but also nurture their critical consciousness and challenge them to struggle for justice in their communities and beyond.

Like Kathleen, Sharon used Wiesel & Wiesel's (2006) *Night* as a springboard to a broader discussion of social injustice. Specifically, in order to develop a theory about the role of oppression, dehumanization, and colonization in genocide, Sharon's tenth grade students examined representations of genocide across multiple historical contexts and types of media (including *Night* [Wiesel & Wiesel, 2006], the films *Life is Beautiful* [Benigni, 1999] and *Hotel Rwanda* [George, 2004], the rap song "They Don't Give a Fuck About Us" [Shakur, 2002], clips from documentaries about gang violence, excerpts from Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* [Zinn, 2003], and YouTube clips about Darfur, Palestine, and the African and Indigenous Holocausts). At the conclusion of the unit, students wrote a paper analyzing whether the increased morbidity of local people of color due to crime, drugs, and gang violence could be considered an example of genocide. Overall, the unit centralized evidence-based analysis, student-generated examples of oppression, and the relationships among oppression, dehumanization, colonialism, and genocide. When framing her unit, Sharon said it addressed principles of teaching for social justice by engaging students in critical dialogue, using culturally-relevant texts as bridges to canonical content, emphasizing high level academic and literacy skills, differentiating assessment, and explicitly teaching about inequity and power, though she noted that "the most explicit teaching about resistance, power, and injustice is done by the students themselves through their original analyses."

Despite differences between Kathleen and Sharon's approaches to teaching for social justice, Sharon also found the relationship between her vision of teaching for social justice and ELA standards to be relatively intuitive. Moreover, Sharon characterized the dichotomization of teaching for social justice and standards-based instruction as a "purposely-spread, common misconception." In her discussion of her practice, Sharon highlighted several examples of how she bridges the two:

My students synthesize information from multiple sources when they write persuasive papers or speeches on why crack was introduced by the u.s. government into the streets of [local cities] etc. My students analyze the way another's life influences her/his worldview and how that worldview manifests itself in her/his texts when they read and write, whether it's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *Othello*. My students write well-composed business letters that support organizing campaigns, such as the Association of Raza Educators' one, demanding the Hispanic Scholarship Fund open its scholarship eligibility to undocumented students. All of these are high level literacy skills, but coupled with the analytical and action components, they become critical literacy skills. These academic activities provide students with a space to critically analyze what's going on around them, which in my experience, has led to student-initiated action to address the injustices they face.

However, Sharon also emphasized that, for her, teaching for social justice was not without risk, noting that "once students develop analytical tools, they critique the hell out of EVERYTHING—including the mandated curriculum and assessments." She highlighted past conflict with administration regarding her teaching approach, including censure and eventual dismissal from her previous teaching job; this led Sharon to seek employment in the charter school where she currently teaches.

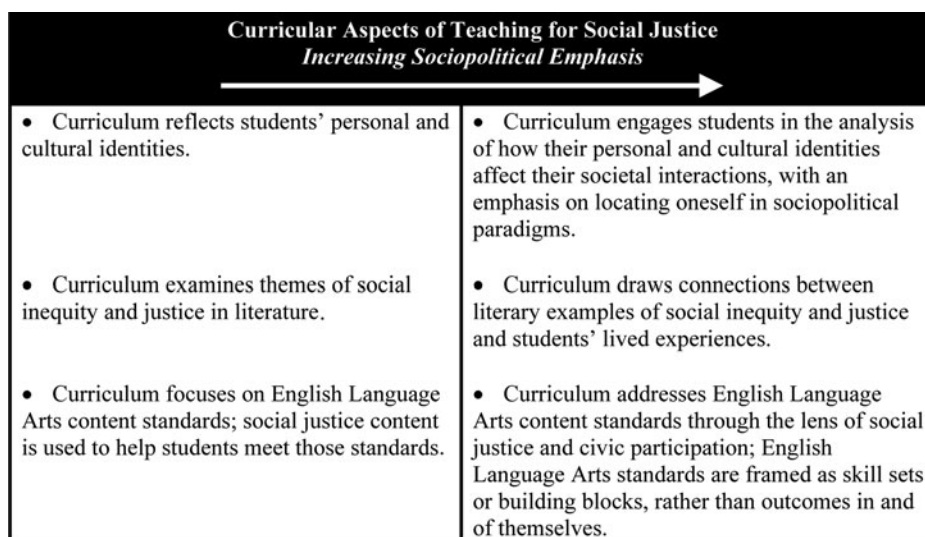


FIGURE 1 Curricular Aspects of Teaching for Social Justice.

Examining Sociopolitical Variance

Both Kathleen and Sharon used Wiesel & Wiesel's (2006) *Night* as a foundation for addressing specific English Language Arts content standards, examining the social and historical context of the Holocaust, and analyzing contemporary examples of oppression; however they had dramatically different classroom-level emphases. Some of these differences stemmed from the teachers' different social locations and curricular priorities: Kathleen, a white teacher teaching in a homogeneous small town, used justice-oriented texts to broaden students' horizons. Sharon, a teacher of color teaching in a social justice magnet school in a major urban area, used justice-oriented texts to contextualize students' lived experiences. However, both teachers' instructional decisions were informed by their personal frameworks for teaching for social justice. For Kathleen, whose vision of teaching for social justice centralized raising awareness and promoting acceptance, students' analysis of oppression in literature was the primary goal; for Sharon, who framed teaching for social justice as a step towards social reconstruction, students' analysis of oppression in literature was a vehicle for wider social critique.

Similar trends were visible across participating teachers' social identities, contexts, and submitted lesson plans. Teachers described their approach as one that used social justice content to promote students' English Language Arts learning or one that used English Language Arts content to promote students' social justice learnings; their curriculum and pedagogy then reflected those priorities. While philosophically disparate, both of these perspectives are valid approaches to teaching for social justice in standards-based contexts; however, we can also anticipate that an individual teacher's approach will carry implications for student learning.

The following model offers a framework for characterizing teachers' approach to teaching for social justice, and the resulting impact on their approach to curriculum, pedagogy, and social

Pedagogical Aspects of Teaching for Social Justice <i>Increasing Sociopolitical Emphasis</i>	
• Pedagogy creates a supportive classroom community that welcomes diversity of opinions. • Pedagogy emphasizes students' development of critical thinking skills and inquiry-based learning. • Pedagogy facilitates students' academic, civic, and personal growth through rigorous course content, self- and peer-assessment, cooperative learning, and performance-based assessment.	• Pedagogy challenges dominant paradigms through the integration and analysis of multiple perspectives regarding literary, school-based, local, historical and political phenomena. • Pedagogy engages students in the critical analysis of literary, historical and contemporary examples of social inequity and justice. • Pedagogy emphasizes civic participation and social justice activism as central elements of students' academic, civic and personal growth. Student performance products are intended to affect sociopolitical change.

FIGURE 2 Pedagogical Aspects of Teaching for Social Justice.

action. In Figures 1–3 the practices on the left centralize classroom-level applications, while those on the right use classroom-level analyses to fuel wider sociopolitical critique.

This variance in approach echoes trends noted within other equity-oriented education reform movements. Westheimer and Kahne (2004), for example, identified three distinct political emphases within democratic education: a conservative and individualistic focus on personal

Social Action Oriented Aspects of Teaching for Social Justice <i>Increasing Sociopolitical Emphasis</i>	
• Teachers see themselves as educational change agents, emphasizing their role within the classroom. • Teachers raise students' awareness of injustice and inequity by examining related themes in literature, and "exposing" students to historical examples of injustice. • Teachers encourage students' civic participation and social action through a focus on historic and contemporary activists, letter writing campaigns, and public service initiatives related to inequity and injustice.	• Teachers see themselves as sociopolitical activists, emphasizing their role in addressing institutional injustice in schools and society. • Teachers engage students in the investigation and critical analysis of pressing local and societal issues, with an emphasis on the sociopolitical impacts of systemic oppression and injustice. • Teachers encourage students' civic participation and social action through the guided analysis of pressing social issues, and development of student-driven, justice-oriented interventions. Projects emphasize outcomes associated with social action, and engage students in reflection regarding the effectiveness of their intervention.

FIGURE 3 Social Action Oriented Aspects of Teaching for Social Justice.

responsibility, a progressive focus on participation in civic duties and society, and a Leftist justice-orientation focused on social critique and societal change. Likewise, multiple theorists have developed frameworks for multicultural education that attempt to account for multicultural educators' sociopolitical imperatives, emphasis on social action, and likelihood of affecting systemic reform (e.g., Banks, 1995; Grant & Sleeter, 2007; May, 1999; Nieto, 1999, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 1999; Suzuki, 1984). Each of these models, however, remains located within the emphases of a particular reform tradition; Banks' (1995) framework, for example, focuses narrowly on curricular practices, while Villegas and Lucas (2002) centralize teachers' beliefs about education. Further, these frameworks tend to emphasize either teachers' philosophical orientations (e.g., Gorski, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) or their practice (e.g., Banks, 1995), leaving unanswered the question of how teachers' social justice beliefs impact their curricular and pedagogical practices (Gorski, 2010).

IMPLICATIONS

This study has several implications for teacher educators. First, by highlighting the strategies English Language Arts teachers use to successfully implement their vision of teaching for social justice in the context of academically rigorous, standards-based instruction, this study refutes critics' ongoing attempts to portray teaching for social justice as unrelated, and even contradictory to, students' content learning. Moreover, this study complements existing research on teaching for social justice with English Language Arts (e.g., Bieler, 2012; Singer, 2006), social studies (e.g., Agarwal, 2011; Wade, 2007), mathematics (e.g., Frankenstein, 1990; Gutstein, 2003), and science (e.g., Barton, 2003) curriculum; collectively, this growing body of research offers multiple curricular and pedagogical examples that teacher educators might draw upon in the preservice classroom. For example, teacher educators might ask candidates to evaluate Kathleen and Sharon's different strategies for teaching *Night* (Wiesel & Wiesel, 2006), to map social justice oriented curriculum to content area standards, or to reframe mandated curriculum through a social justice lens. Practices such as these are especially important in the context of mounting concern about the fragmentation between preservice teacher preparation and teaching practice (e.g., see Zeichner, 2010, 2011), as well as research suggesting new teachers' social justice visions are often overwhelmed by the demands of standards-based, and especially standardized, curriculum (e.g., Agarwal, 2011; Agarwal et al., 2010; Cochran-Smith, Shakman et al., 2009; Poplin & Rivera, 2005).

Additionally, this study found that teachers' conceptual frameworks for teaching for social justice have a profound impact on their curricular and pedagogical practices. By offering a set of models exploring variance in teachers' approaches to teaching for social justice, this study offers researchers and teacher educators an additional lens through which to examine trends in pre- and in-service teachers' practice. Teacher educators might use the models presented in this analysis to guide candidates in exploring their own vision of teaching for social justice, identifying curricular and pedagogical practices that reflect their individual philosophy, and preparing to translate that vision into classroom practice. In my own graduate seminar on teaching for social justice, for example, I guide students in analyzing existing models of teaching for social justice; developing a personally relevant vision statement; and developing a curricular unit that is appropriate for their clinical sites, standards-based, and reflective of their social justice vision. Students then teach their units in local P-12 classrooms, solicit feedback from their peers and school-based partners

regarding their curriculum and pedagogy, and evaluate student work for evidence of academic and social justice learning.

Finally, while both Kathleen and Sharon offer compelling examples of teaching for social justice in academically rigorous ELA contexts, I share Picower's (2011) questions regarding the ways in which varying approaches to teaching for social justice impact students, and education systems, differently. Kathleen and Sharon's social locations manifest in discordant approaches to teaching for social justice: Sharon's emphasis on social action reflects the urgency of her students' daily experiences with oppression, while Kathleen's more contemplative approach carries less of an activist imperative. This discrepancy is especially salient given Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) finding that different political emphases across democratic education initiatives lead to different P-12 student outcomes, as well as increasing the focus on the neoliberal roots of standards-based curriculum (e.g., Caughlan & Beach, 2007; Hursh, 2007; Matusov, 2011; Rubin & Kazanjian, 2011). Are teachers like Kathleen inadvertently "fighting a losing battle" (Picower, 2011, p. 1130) because their attempts to create a socially just classroom don't extend to political activism? Or, are their efforts part of a broader attempt to "work within the system to do what is right for their current students while working to change the constraints that are perpetuating unjust educational experiences for their future students" (Picower, 2011, p. 1131)? These are critical questions of praxis, as we consider strategies for preparing teachers to both function effectively within, and while reconstructing, an unjust educational landscape.

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