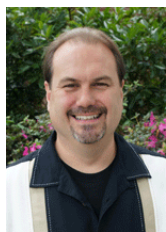


## A Qualitative Analysis of High School Students' Engagement with Poetry and Social Justice

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**ABSTRACT:** This qualitative content analysis examined how 112 high school students engaged in social justice by composing their own poetry as part of English language arts instruction. Following pedagogical recommendations from Miller (2010) and Morrell (2005), students participated in a unit of study on poetry and social justice using *October Mourning* (Newman, 2012) as a mentor text. Students then worked in groups to compose their own poetry projects that addressed social justice topics of their choosing. Data consisting of student-composed poetry were analyzed by two researchers using open coding to develop four themes: *the individual vs. society*, *subjugation of women*, *the corrupting influence of money*, and *suicide*. Themes are examined in depth with the first three placing students at odds with the mechanisms and expectations of oppressive governments and social institutions. The emphasis on suicide led the researchers to argue that topics often considered taboo by schools should be addressed. Opportunities for incorporation of such topics in English classes are discussed. The discussion addresses challenges to conducting a similar unit as well as recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** poetry, social justice education, LGBTQ themed literature, content analysis



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## Theoretical Framework

*As a poet, I know it's part of my job to use my imagination. It's part of my job as a human being, too. Because only if each of us imagines that what happened to Matthew Shepard could happen to any of us will we be motivated to do something. And something must be done.*  
~Lesleá Newman

This project began its evolution in first author Victor Malo-Juvera's young adult literature class, which is a requirement for pre-service secondary English teachers at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Inspired by *October Mourning* (Newman, 2012) and by the teachers' guide written by colleague Katie Peel (2012), I believed *October Mourning* could serve as a compelling mentor text to demonstrate how English language arts instruction could weave together elements such as literary studies, analysis of poetic forms, and social justice. Students wrote about numerous topics/events such as the Aurora Theater shooting, the Trayvon Martin killing, and the Sandy Hook shooting. Deeply moved and impressed by all aspects of their work, I shared this project with several colleagues. The second author, Linda Spears-Bunton, began to use this project in a graduate program at a large urban university that is mostly populated by in-service teachers. She too was moved and excited about the passion and commitment with which her students took on this project. Before long, her students began to incorporate aspects of this project in their own classrooms. In the span of less than one year, this idea had made its way from a coastal university in North Carolina to high school classrooms in one of the largest school districts in the United States.

From the outset, it was clear that students and teachers responded to social justice issues, poetry, class assignments, and one another in compelling ways. In order to understand some of this movement, we believed that further investigation was warranted, and what follows is a captured glimpse of how students used poetry to engage in social justice.

Dewey's (1916) belief that education plays a critical role in creating and maintaining a Deliberative Democracy is often referenced as one of the seminal moments of social justice education. Equally important, Freire's (1986) *conscientização* and liberatory pedagogy have informed much of today's social justice education movement. More recent scholars (Greene, 1988; hooks, 1994) concur in their assessment that social justice is critical to the functioning and survival of democratically organized societies. Social justice education encompasses multiple discourses such as feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory, critical race theory, and critical pedagogy (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

Regardless of their primary theoretical orientation, numerous scholars have argued that social justice education should become an integral part of teaching (e.g., Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998) and of teacher preparation programs (e.g., Nieto, 2000; 2013). Furthermore, there are a myriad of resources that provide guidance for incorporating social justice into elementary schools (e.g., Picower, 2012), middle schools (e.g., Kraft, 2007), and in specific content areas such as science (e.g., Calabrese, 2003), literacy (e.g., Powell & Rightmeyer, 2011), mathematics (e.g., Gutstein, 2006), and English language arts (e.g., Alsup & Miller, 2014).

Alsup and Miller (2014) argue that social justice education is the principal work of English educators at all levels, and Morrell (2005) concurs with their thoughts as he contends that teacher education programs should promote a "critical English education" that "is explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations" (p. 313). He further avers that students should not only deconstruct dominant texts, but also produce their own that can further their ends toward attaining social justice. The 2014 National Council of Teachers of English Conference on English Education's (NCTE CEE) position statement on social justice heeds Morrell's call by urging English teachers to challenge the "inequitable hierarchies of power and privilege" and to be mindful that schools often "reinforce and reproduce" these injustices.

The pursuit of social justice in English language arts classes is as wide and varied as English language arts is as a subject. Scholars have addressed social justice issues such as challenging notions of race (Spears-Bunton, 1998), using LGBTQ themed literature in classrooms (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009), and using texts that combat rape myth acceptance (Malo-Juvera, 2014). Although these approaches have their own unique aspects, they all follow Freire's (1986) belief that social justice begins when a person becomes conscious of the sources and causes of one's oppression and that education could give students the agency to counteract it. Clearly such understanding is necessary to plan and to direct action that will mitigate or eliminate oppressive forces. Thus, teaching social justice requires powerful and universal tools that speak to the human heart and head. Poetry is one of those tools.

Poetry may well be humanity's song to itself; it resonates deeply within human history and the human spirit (Ciardiello, 2010). Although the standardized testing that has accompanied No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and now the Common Core State Standards has reduced poetry instruction in many classrooms to memorizing facts about form, many English teachers have found a way to do more. Poetry and social justice have been utilized together with music in secondary classes (Christensen, 2009; Sanchez, 2007), in literacy education (Ciardiello, 2010), through the creation of original poetry (Rosaen, 2003), in after-school programs using hip-hop literacies (Norton, 2011), paired with performance poetry (Camangian, 2008; Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005), and among sixth-grade students in pursuit of democratic engagement (Kinloch, 2005). While these studies address important intersections of social justice and English education, there is a need for more research that examines how mentor texts and/or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) themed poetry influences students' engagement with poetry and social justice.

**Outrage, so common in the poetry of the students in this study, is evoked as readers experience human beings used and cast off like detritus.**

### Why *October Mourning*?

*October Mourning* is a collection of poems that retell the murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard, who was brutally beaten and left tied to a fence outside Laramie, Wyoming. The poems are narrated from unique points of view such as Matthew's cat, the road the truck carrying the captive Matthew travelled along to the killing field, the fence that held his broken body for eighteen hours, the truck headlights and the stars that shed light on the darkness of the acts perpetuated against him, and the doe that was found sitting near Matthew. The text is divided into two sections that tell the events before and after Matthew's murder, using a variety of poetic forms such as haikus, found poems, pantoums, concrete poems, rhymed couplets, list poems, alphabet poems, villanelles, acrostics, and poems modeled after previously published poems. *October Mourning* has won numerous awards, including the Florida Council of Teachers of English Joan F. Kaywell Award, 2014 and the Young Adult Library Services Association Best Fiction for Young Adults Book 2013 (Newman, 2015).

The wealth and diversity of form and content is what motivated us to use *October Mourning* as a mentor text that students could emulate and use as a guide in their own poetic journeys toward social justice. We wondered what would happen among high school students, so often described as disconnected from the world outside their immediate life circle or as resistant to critical thinking, who were given an opportunity to read *October Mourning* and to respond by developing a poetry project emanating from a topic of their own choosing grounded in social justice. As such, we sought to address the following research question for this study: After reading and engaging in an instructional unit of *October Mourning*, how did students' composed poetry reflect their engagement with social justice?

In the sections that follow, we lay out the specifics of our research design, data collection and analysis. The analysis includes an extensive examination of

the four major themes that emerged from this study. We close with a discussion of the limitations of the study and our vision about what future research on teaching social justice in English language arts classes might consider.

### **Poetry and Social Justice: The Unit of Study**

This project was developed as a way for high school students to use a mentor text that addressed social justice topics and allowed for the in-depth study of poetry. Students read and discussed *October Mourning*, participated in poetry instruction, and engaged in discussions of social justice. Following these activities, students were asked to form groups to choose a topic of social justice that they would then address through the composition of their own poetry projects using *October Mourning* as a model text. The students' poetry projects contained: (A) cover page art; (B) a table of contents; (C) a one page summary that gave background on the topic/event that was the focus of the poetry project; (D) the poems; and (E) an explication that identified the form used and gave background information on the inspiration for each poem. University-level students also completed a teacher's guide that contained pre-reading activities, discussion questions, connections for cross curricular activities, and resources for further study.

### **Participants: Space and Place**

There were 112 high school students sample from four Advance Placement Language and Literature classes at an urban South Florida high school. Students were informed that their class work from a unit on poetry would be used for analysis in a study and that all classwork would be anonymous when given to researchers. Institutional and school district IRB permissions were obtained and students were given the option of whether or not they wanted their work shared with the researchers. Only eight students out of 120 chose not to have their work included.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This descriptive case study (Yin, 2003) used content analysis (Schwandt, 2007) to examine the way students used poetry to engage in social justice topics in high school Advanced Placement

Language and Literature classes. Data in this study were poems written by students as part of regular classroom instruction. There were a total of 19 student composed poetry projects consisting of 248 poems that were analyzed independently by the two authors of this study using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to develop categories and themes. The authors then met and compared their findings; there was nearly perfect agreement in identified themes with discrepancies being variations in how categories and themes were named rather than their content and meaning. The authors then negotiated and collapsed some themes, and agreed upon the major themes that would be presented in this paper (see Table 1 in the appendix).

### **Findings: Coming to Know and Understand Social Justice**

Students were introduced to the project through a discussion on social justice that was defined by their teacher as "the ability people have to realize their potential in the society where they live" and that the goal of social justice was to ensure that individuals "fulfilled their societal roles and received what was due from society." Students were also introduced to concepts of social injustice and topics such as wealth distribution, ableism, ageism, classism, discrimination, homophobia, racism, and sexism. *October Mourning* was read in class and 45 students participated in a wide-ranging discussion via video chat with author Lesleá Newman about the intersections of poetry and social justice from an author's point of view. During and after the reading of *October Mourning*, all students participated in classroom instruction on poetry that addressed poetic forms, diction, reader response activities, and discussions of poetry as social justice. After completing *October Mourning*, students began composing their own poetry projects. For this assignment, students chose a topic and composed poems making up a "poetry project" that contained a cover page, a table of contents, a summary of the topic addressed, the poems, and an explication of poetic forms.

The student poetry projects reflected a wide variety of topics; however, 17 of the 19 poetry projects analyzed involved young people who had been brutalized by adults in various ways (see Table 2 for

poetry project titles and themes). Societies often normalize oppression of individuals by indoctrinating belief systems into the oppressed though many aspects of culture such as the arts, holidays, and national myths (Gramsci, 1975). Gramsci (1975) labelled this system of maintaining power as cultural hegemony, and in this study students were able to provide counter narratives to several forms of sanctioned oppression. The outrage that students felt toward oppressors was manifest in three major themes: *The Individual vs. Society*, *The Subjugation of Women*, and *The Corrupting Influence of Money*. The last theme offered a disturbing solution to the problem of oppression: *Suicide* (see Table 2 in the appendix).

### The Individual vs. Society

The most apparent theme presented by the student-poets involved the conflict and struggles between individuals and their society. These conflicts were explored in terms of economic disparity and injustice (*Air Pollution* and *In the Sea*), legal systems (*Affluenza* and *Ramon Sampedro*), and cultural/class divides (*Nigerian Girls Kidnapped!*, *FGM Horror Stories* and *The Road Last Traveled*). A collective outrage resonated throughout the student-poets' responses as they gave voice to individuals who were oppressed. The conflict between an individual and society is poignantly evident in *Ramon Sampedro*. This poetry project is a response to the tragic plight of a paralyzed Spanish fisherman who petitioned the Spanish and European courts for legal access to an assisted suicide for almost 30 years. For example, in "I Just Want to Leave," the conflict with a society that denies Ramon the right to self-determination is exemplified:

Every day I am stuck in bed,  
Watching the seconds go by.  
The question that I ask:  
Should I love or should I die.  
I already know the answer;  
Nobody listens to me.  
I try to fight for my right  
But I constantly fail

Herein, the student-poets speak to several issues important to all human beings, and perhaps particularly germane to adolescents entering adulthood including an individual's

right to have his/her voice heard and respected and the inherent moral struggle when one tries to determine what is "right" in terms of the individual and in terms of the customs and laws of a particular society. The first line of the poem identified Ramon's position—stuck in bed—as a place no one, adult or adolescent, would want to be for any period of time. Twenty-nine years of forced, conscious imprisonment seem outrageous. Ramon's persistent, yet futile struggle for escape and longing for freedom evoke both compassion and frustration.

Students' identification with Ramon's struggles against an unyielding society continued in the couplet that closes the sonnet "Medical Advice": "Making them stay should be a crime/Everyone should be able to die." This is a chilling line, especially as we shall report later, as suicide was often viewed as an acceptable way to escape difficult situations. In Ramon's singular case, the argument "I'm only just a head" is factual and absolute in terms of his medical prognosis. Even so, given the Judeo-Christian ethic that prevails in many Western nations, human life is precious and sacred irrespective of the quality of that life and must be protected. But at what cost to an individual?

The struggles of an individual against society are heartbreakingly chronicled in *FGM Horror Stories* which portrays the phenomenon of female genital mutilation. The poems produced by students demonstrate an understanding of both the overt and subtle contradictions and conflicts in traditions, religion, and practices of brutal social injustice that ensconce ritualized female genital mutilation. Consider the list poem "Family Complex," where the poet protested the unquestioning continuation of a gruesome tradition: "9. It's tradition – I did it, so can she/10. It's our religion." Herein the student-poet argued that neither tradition nor religion justifies the practice of FGM or alleviates the suffering of the child left in a dirt hole to bleed to death.

Although all of the struggles against society are not as gruesome as those told in *FGM Horror Stories*, they are no less compelling. In *Air*

*Pollution Shanghai*, students used poetry to indict the ruling class in “The Elites” who “turn a blind eye to smoke and ash in everyone,” in “The Leaders” where “some people are not important/people that populate the Earth,” and in “The Sickness”:

Cough  
Cough  
Someone can't smell  
Someone can't taste  
Someone needs a plastic toy made and  
delivered halfway to hell  
So factories just chug  
And carbon Monoxide becomes the people's  
drug  
Somewhere in Shanghai

Herein, there are several sources of poison: the corruption of the ruling class, the toxicity citizens are forced to inhale, the power and pressure of greed, and governmental indifference to the wellbeing of the citizenry. Moreover, the Chinese government is not the only government to be on the receiving end of scathing critique. In *In the Sea*, which tells the story of Cuban emigration to America by boat, the Cuban government is blamed for creating such horrendous conditions that its people would risk their lives to escape. In “Life,” students use repetition to level their indictment:

No Freedom  
No Happiness  
No Dreams  
No Inspiration  
No Rights  
  
Just corruption

Taken together, the poems within the body of work in this theme address issues that are meaningful to adolescents and adults globally. These poems indicate that the student-poets understand how the legal system promotes/permits injustice for the sake of moneyed interests and are cognizant of the inconsistent application of the law, as in the case of where a young man who killed four individuals is excused because of wealth (*Affluenza*) and where girls are mutilated to acquire wealth (*FGM Horror Stories*), while a man who considers himself “just a head” languishes for three decades (*Ramon Sampedro*). Following Freire's (1986) notion of

*conscientization*, these student-poets have identified the source of power, oppression, and injustice—they have named the oppressors through their poetry—called them out. Importantly, students connected to individuals although they were miles and continents away; they gave them voice and dignity and offered their shared humanity.

### Subjugation of Women

The oppression of individuals continued in a much more focused manner as numerous poems examined women who were subjugated by society and by individuals. Subjugation herein references more than conquering as in maintaining physical control, but also enslavement, manufactured deformity, stupidification by denial of opportunities for education (see Macedo, 1994), and ultimately de-humanization as infants, girls, and young women are violently robbed of their feminine individuality. Perhaps most poignantly, *Malala*, which told the story of Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by the Taliban for attending school, pointed out how women who attempt to access the same rights as men, in this case education, are viciously punished. The following lines from “Power” show how point of view and repetition were used in a hypnotic way:

I am going to kill her!  
How dare she learn?!  
I am going to kill her!  
Education is the wrong female turn!!  
I am going to kill her!  
Women must be controlled!!  
I am going to kill her!

The dangers to girls who seek an education continued in *Nigerian Girls Kidnapped!* that told of the Boko Haram's abduction of 240 girls from a Nigerian school. Given the cost and limited availability of education in Nigeria, particularly in rural areas, these kidnappings bear important ideological and national ramifications. Nigerians seeking to impose Sharia law upon the population view these girls and their families as being in violation of social and religious customs. On the other hand, educated girls represent a significant investment by their families, and these girls have the potential for uplifting the standards and ways

of living for their communities by entering careers such as teachers, nurses, or doctors. They represent change, hope, and feminine empowerment even in a nation where many still practice female genital mutilation. However, once captive, the girls are reduced to chattel property.

Consider the descriptions in "Rebirth": "Then I was sold...I am a slave" and in "Dream Wedding": "Twelve dollars is what my husband must pay/In order for me to have a dream wedding day." These lines evidence mature conceptualization of marriage and the death of the soul and identity. Importantly, the language used by the poets suggests that they understood how cheaply purchased wives are valued and devalued. Irony is deftly used to represent a de-evolutionary metamorphosis in the death of a young woman with a promising life and the birth of a slave in a "dream wedding" that is more like a nightmare.

In many places, females need not break gender norms in order to warrant punishment. *FGM Horror Stories* describes the ritualistic mutilation of female genitalia which is pervasive in 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East. In addition to portraying the gruesome mutilations that occur, the poems protest the insanity of dogmatically following tradition. In the acrostic poem "FGM," "little girls" are "mutilated" to "please men" and are "Forever scarred/Made a farce/Going strong because of tradition." Interestingly, in *FGM Horror Stories*, the blame is not cast solely upon males, given that the student-poets are unyielding in their indictment of women who are often the assailants in genital mutilations. In "Mother's Love," a six-year old girl's mother is held accountable for her mutilation when it is written that the mother "shall snip her bud so it does not grow" and the theme of treachery continues in the cinquain, "Family:"

Family  
together, tradition  
trusting, loving, protecting  
betrayal, sadness, disappointed, deception  
Gone.

In the poem "Operating Table," it is the table who mourns for the children laid across its "old surface" that is "speckled with crimson rust"...

...I ponder the frigid and unfeeling alien beings,  
The ones that believe that they are conducting this girl a kindness.  
The ones that stare unreceptive to the evil they have done,  
The one that use faulty reasoning  
That they have mouths to feed,  
That this payment will be the one that lines their pockets,  
Saving their foul lives.  
"For the family" they whisper to this little thing,  
Unmoving on the table.  
To this small sack of skin and bones whose Soul left her  
with a final screech.  
The girl on the table is five.  
The mother  
Enters unknowing—  
She has sacrificed her child to the cause of her own disillusioned Faith.

Although the three aforementioned poems chronicled suffering at the hands of society, other student poetry addressed abuse on a much more individual basis. *Chained* and *Taken* both told the story of the three women who were kidnapped and held as sex slaves by Ramon Castro. *An Unhappy Marriage*, portrayed the very individual story of a woman who is physically abused by her husband. Even when women are not the center of a project, they are often portrayed as objects to be used. Consider that in *Affluenza*, the first two of three narrative poems "Veni," "Vidi," and "Vici" describe how a young wealthy boy (presumably Ethan Couch) used his maid for his sexual pleasure.

Veni  
There was once a boy raised from money  
Which ingrained in him something funny:  
Rather fond of the maid  
Whom he dreamt he had laid—  
He woke stuck to the bed,  
Not with honey.  
...He plotted a plan to clear his name.

Vidi  
"I should never have hired  
Such a painful ingrate!"

On the day she was fired  
 She knew it was fate...  
 And like a surgeon's knife  
 Cut ties with the maid  
 He'd impulsively laid.

Vici

He was down for the count  
 Three drinks passed his right mind...  
 As the headlights flared  
 To the windshield their bodies went  
 flopping  
 He had killed these two  
 Of that he knew  
 So really he couldn't have stayed  
 But no one was around  
 To watch them hit the ground  
 He got away—just like with the maid.

These three poems are interesting and compelling on a number of levels. The titles of the poems approximate the words of Julius Caesar, which translate to: I came, I saw, and I conquered. This statement may be understood as confidence, a statement of fact and/or arrogance. In the poems "Veni" and "Vici," a young man sees a vulnerable woman—and employee of his family—understands her position in contrast to his own, and rapes her. Outrage, so common in the poetry of the students in this study, is evoked as readers experience human beings used and cast off like detritus.

The most compelling responses to this theme are those protesting the torture, murder, rape and dehumanization of women and girls. In these poems, the young poets recognize the source, cause, and participants in the degradation and oppression of girls and women. Girls and women experience life in fundamentally different ways *because* they are female. Females are used as currency, as property, as a sexual outlet, and as participants in the perpetuation of exploitation and domination of their fellow females. The student-poets' consciousness opens the possibility for hope and help for girls and women globally who struggle against unspeakable terror. For example, consider "The Promise" from *Nigerian Girls Kidnapped!*:

You must stay your ground  
 Sing Sweet Songs

Justice will come  
 Freedom will spring  
 You will be found

Throughout, one finds a potent mixture of outrage and determination and of oppression and compassion. This juxtaposition of emotions in the poem opens the space for change not only in the way people think, but also in the way people act toward others who although different from themselves share a bond of humanity and a desire for justice.

This depiction stands in stark contrast to how adolescents are often portrayed in popular culture as mindless consumers who have been indoctrinated by songs such as "Blurred Lines" into a patriarchal hegemony that perpetuates rape myths among males and females (Burt, 1980). Although an in-depth discussion of rape myths is beyond the scope of this paper, typical rape myths include the belief that victims invite their assaults by their choice of clothing or their behavior, that victims actually desire to be raped, and that many victims of rape fabricate their accusations after engaging in consensual intercourse (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). In light of disturbing public responses to allegations of rape in places such as Steubenville, of alleged systemic suppression of rape reporting by numerous universities, and by the continued lionization of male athletes who have been accused of rape, it is reasonable to conclude that although rape myths still abound in American culture, the students in this study were eager to provide a counter narrative.

Consider that the student-poets were able to identify and address the labeling of female sexuality in *FGM Horror Stories*, and it becomes clear that not all adolescents have bought into the popular culture myths that label girls who are sexually active as less worthy than their promiscuous male counterparts. This recognition is important as the gender divide is predicated upon such beliefs that bestow rights and abilities upon males that are not considered appropriate for females. The student-poets were able to interrogate the myths that surrounded them, and these interrogations are an example of how genuine critical thought can be part of English language arts classes.



## The Corrupting Influence of Money

An element that contributed to the objectification and commodification of women was their value as chattel to be bought and sold. The concept of money as a corrupting influence allowed the Boko Haram to sell its kidnapped victims into marriage (“Rebirth” and “Them”) and forms the justification for female genital mutilation in order to maintain their daughters purity and viability as future income: “That this payment will be the one that line their pockets” (“Operating Table”). This theme is repeated in “Ceremonials”:

...I did not recognize my voice in the wreckage of my body

I had no control.

The damage was complete, I was a prize

Money to be

earned from,

I could still not

block the screams...

You who plan,

who destroy, who

massacre

womanly bodies

“Oh, silly girl it

does not hurt.”

This poem expressed not only outrage at the destruction of a woman’s body for profit, but likewise at the lie told to suffering girls that mutilation does not hurt and implicitly that it does not destroy the mind, soul, and heart of a woman. Traditional roles—mother, grandmothers, sisters and aunts—whom one would expect to protect a girl-child, plan these ceremonies of blood, tears and pain. The student-poets herein argued: “the natural world did not agree to this brutality.”

Money is also blamed for creating and maintaining the economic system that oppresses the citizens in *Air Pollution in Shanghai* where the elites ignore the working people who “make our toys so we poison their air” (“The Leaders”). Again we report the student-poets’ understanding that some people—the poor and working class in this case—are treated as if their lives were useful only in so far

as they serve the economic ends of “The Leaders.” Toys, cars, and gas have value. Human sickness and suffering are of no consequence.

Perhaps in no other project was this theme as apparent as in *Affluenza*. While racism continues to be a plague in our schools, adolescents are also aware of the privilege that wealth can bestow, and it is summed up succinctly in the haiku “Nummus,” which is Latin for money: “There are people dead/But money solves all things?/So daddy has said.” Money is portrayed as a tool that allows privileged teens to “get away with a lot” in “Prep School” and in “No Apologies” where “Money saves lives/But not yours.”

Herein the student-poets indicate that they understand that the power of money maintains a playing field that is tilted toward the wealthy. Their poems suggest that they are cognizant of the divide created by widening income disparities, and present a challenge to the push of free market ideas that does not appear to be embraced by many students. Some may ask if students should be challenging the myth of the American dream; however, considering the United States is one of the least

upward economically mobile industrialized nations, the interrogation of this myth is warranted (DeParle, 2012). The student-poets challenge the notion that money in and of itself is a societal good, challenge the use of money in ways that cause social and individual harm, and mock the notion that wealth is a justifiable or acceptable excuse for rape and vehicular murder.

## Suicide

The last theme to be discussed is perhaps the most disturbing. Numerous poems portrayed suicide as an acceptable solution to one’s problems, and the most obvious was in *Ramon Sampedro*, who petitioned the legal system to have an assisted

**Educators and researchers should provide a loud counter narrative to the commercially profitable yet inauthentic learning that is often passed off as quality instruction.**

suicide. In "Thoughts of the Mind" students describe Ramon's desires "To hear the line, flat, fade, once and for all/Is it to me, is it my call?" The student-poets used symbolism in "Tic-Toc" to represent the baptismal cleansing offered by death: "May he bathe, once again, in the water of life?/Or is he to suffer and strife."

Suicide is also regarded as a viable option to escape abusive conditions in several other student poems. In *An Unhappy Marriage* Frances Shea commits suicide to escape an abusive marriage and is depicted contemplating suicide in these lines from "Beauty of Annihilation":

A Life of fear is not one worth living,  
Got to make it to the nearest train station;  
But I can't get out of here, fate is  
unforgiving,  
Now the only way out is by self-  
annihilation.  
...  
So the song of death to me is music  
...  
I hope, as I hold the pills, that I'll be free  
...  
Death is so beautiful  
It looks so beautiful  
It looks so beautiful on me.

*Same Love is Shame Love*, which uses poetry to tell the story of a 20-year-old gay man who commits suicide after years of bullying by peers, presents suicide as an effective option for relief: "The pain of not being able to express love/The options to feel relieved" ("Twenty Years"). This portrayal continues in "Crying Out":

I cried out in despair  
Nobody heard me.  
They noticed too late.  
I felt a sense of relief when I threw myself,  
Everything moved so fast around  
me.  
I saw a bright light and then  
I felt at home.

Suicide was also considered an effective choice for Ariel Castro, whose suicide allowed him to avoid years of incarceration in "Imprisoned" that appears in *Chained*. In *Untitled: Poetry Project on Social Justice*, suicidal ideation is described in "This Pounding in my Head": "I wish all of this could just

stop/But it won't until the day I drop." Although these lines could refer to things other than suicide, when considered alongside poems such as "In the ER" that describe a failed suicide attempt and the suicide note described in "Goodbye," it is clear that suicide is not only prevalent, but is considered an acceptable solution to one's problems. Consider how the poem "In the Bed" paints an almost idyllic portrait of death: "He looks so serene/Laying in the bed so calm/He is at peace."

The prevalence of suicide and the way it is portrayed as successful in alleviating pain makes this an important topic for discussion. In order to best understand this theme, it is necessary to place suicide in context of the adolescent experience. Consider that suicide is the third leading cause of death in persons aged 15-24 and represents 20% of all deaths in that age group (Kann, et al., 2013). About one in five teenagers seriously considers suicide annually, while 8% actually attempt suicide (Kann, et al., 2013). Researchers have found that the most common reason for adolescent suicide attempts is to escape unbearable circumstances (Jacobson, Batejan, Kleinman, & Gould, 2013). Suicide is often preceded by various forms of mental illness such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, personality disorders, posttraumatic stress disorders, and eating disorders (Duckworth & Freedman, 2013). Furthermore, half of adolescent suicide victims have alcohol in their system (Rowan, 2001), and many teens who attempt suicide are frequent alcohol or substance users (Brent, 1995).

Because most adolescents spend a great deal of time in school, schools can play a critical role in preventing teen suicide. Although some schools have suicide prevention programs (Miller, Eckert, & Mazza, 2009), this topic, along with other topics that are related to suicide, is considered taboo at many schools. Consider that the young adult novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2012), which tells the reasons behind a teenage girl's suicide, was the third most challenged book in 2012 according to the American Library Association (2014). Many schools not only refuse to address suicide directly, but actively discourage students and teachers from discussing it. When one considers that books that deal with many of the issues related to suicide, such as *Looking for Alaska*, which was a top ten

challenged book in 2012 and 2013 (American Library Association, 2014), are also frequently challenged, it is easy to surmise that schools are perpetuating the taboos that surround suicide, mental illness, and substance abuse.

Although the most direct answer to this problem would be having schools incorporate suicide prevention programs into the curriculum, adding more permanent elements into the school culture may also improve students' attitudes toward discussing suicide and its concomitant issues. Consider that schools with Gay Straight Alliance clubs report having a lower number of homophobic bullying than those that do not have them (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012).

There are numerous texts that English teachers could utilize that address suicide and mental illness such as Sylvia Plath's poetry, memoirs such as *The Source of All Things* (Ross, 2012), or one of the many young adult novels that deal directly with suicide such as *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2012). There are also innumerable young adult texts available that focus on related issues such as depression, bullying, and substance abuse. Addressing these topics and engaging in related discussions may alleviate feelings of isolation and shame some students have so they would be more likely to seek assistance, no matter which specific issue they are facing. It is important to note that these are sensitive topics, and we recommend that teachers using texts such as these enlist assistance from guidance counselors, school psychologists, and/or social workers when teaching units that contain elements such as suicide in order to make students aware of social services that are available to them.

### Other Themes and Topics

Beyond the major themes discussed above, there were also other themes and topics that were not as ubiquitous but nonetheless warrant mentioning. Numerous poems included references to God in a variety of ways, such as being beseeched for assistance ("The Knife under the Pillow" from *An Unhappy Marriage*; "Mother's Diary" from *Chained*), being decried for abandonment ("A Cry to God" from *The Life of a Jew*; "The Life" from *Nigerian Girls Kidnapped!*), and being praised for providing

assistance ("My Savior: The Lord" from *Malala*). Bullying was also a topic in several poetry projects because it is blamed for contributing to a girl's eating disorder (*Bullied into Anorexia*) and is credited with creating the culture of violence that led to suicide in *Ending Cycle*. The creative use of what we have labeled "tool poems" is also notable. By emulating poems from *October Mourning*, the student-poets created many poems that retold events from various objects' points of view. Some examples are the concrete poem "The Planters" from Untitled Jimmy Ryce, which is narrated from the point of view of the planter that contained his corpse; "Operating Table" from FGM Horror Stories, which is narrated from the point of view of the table on which mutilations are performed; and "Bill" from Same Love Shame Love, which is narrated from the point of view of a document that confers marriage rights upon same sex couples in New York.

### Social Justice: The Teacher's Experience

Given the depth and richness of the data and focus of this paper on student responses and the limitations of space, little has been said about the teacher, Guillermo (pseudonym), who so graciously dedicated his time, talent, and intelligence to this project. Guillermo has considerable experience teaching with a career spanning twenty years and had participated in a graduate course before the study where he was introduced to this instructional unit. He was excited about repeating something of that experience with his students. During the course of the study, he played a critical role insofar as explaining to his principal what *October Mourning* and the study were about and the learning experience each could provide for students.

In a written reflection on the unit, Guillermo described how many of his students were "intrigued by the choice of subjects that were considered and included within the social justice framework." He spoke of how students were "baffled" that environmental pollution could be a social justice issue and retold how he addressed this topic and many other iterations of social justice in classroom discussions. Beyond deliberations over what constitutes social justice issues, the personal experiences of students played had a major impact

on the unit. Guillermo describes how sexual orientation and suicide were open wounds:

A month or so before the project began, the school had received notice that one of its former students had committed suicide. The student had been well-liked and he had several friends who mourned him. It is speculated that he may have been harassed at university because of his overt, gender bending flamboyant behavior; but this is uncertain. I knew this student and, although I had not taught him, I felt the grief of his friends. Students were beside themselves...to say that I addressed suicide headlong would be incorrect. But it impossible not to do so because there was an additional suicide that year...and I was concerned with a particular student who had been very close to the second victim, who had missed many days of school and who had sought counseling. He was unable to work on the project He asked to be excused from it.

Teaching a unit such as the one presented in this study is not for teachers who do not feel comfortable addressing issues that some may see as controversial or who are averse to intense emotional discussions.

When reflecting on the unit as a whole, Guillermo lamented the limited time he and his students had to work on the project, time he was denied to do more to help students who were experiencing tragedy. He also talked about ways to get around the restrictions imposed by testing and related that if he had more time he would have been able "to work more with the students to help them pick forms of poetry that best matched their ideas." Since the end of the project, Guillermo has moved forward with his pursuit of social justice by holding workshops for colleagues on reproducing this unit and is currently designing an instructional unit that will address teen suicide.

### Discussion

This unit followed Morrell's (2005) recommendations that students analyze previously written texts and produce new ones in order to interrogate existing disparities in power. The student participants wrote a wide ranging array of

poetry that reflected the injustices in the world that deeply concerned them. Although Morrell may have been speaking of critically analyzing texts from the canon, the use of *October Mourning* as a mentor text allowed students to analyze it not only for poetic elements but to also study how diction extends the ability of poetry to engage in social justice. By exploring their own ideas of social justice and by choosing their own topics, students were engaged in this unit, and it was evident that they had conducted a tremendous amount of independent research.

The themes identified through analysis contend that students eagerly embraced McLaren's (2008) ultimate goal of world peace considering that their poems consistently argued for the marginalized and abused to be respected and empowered. Anecdotal information from the classroom teacher conveyed how students were highly engaged in discussions of social justice, how they were rapt with the video chat from author Lesleá Newman, and how they demanded to work with peers from different class periods while others demanded to work alone. They were invested intellectually and emotionally in their learning, and their experiences support Freire's (1986) call for a transformative literacy that can be used by students to promote social justice. A main feature of this unit, the ability of students to choose their topics, their partners, and their forms, all follow basic tenets of social justice education that students do not come to school tabula rasa and that they should have a large degree of autonomy in choosing their educational experiences (Freire, 1970). Ultimately, the poetry they composed strongly supports Jocson's (2010) contention that adolescents can be participatory members of a democracy and that aside from being consumers of knowledge, that with encouragement from their teachers they can be producers of knowledge who "confront social inequities in their lives" (p. 86).

The success of this unit adds to the body of research that examines social justice education in English language arts (e.g. Miller, 2010), that describes poetry instruction (e.g., Wood, 2006), and that combines poetry and social justice instruction (e.g., Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005). While these students were in Advanced Placement Language and Literature classes, we would argue that it was not their academic ability that played a

major role in the success of their work, but their emotional investment in their topics. Their successes composing thoughtful and nuanced works of verse contradict deficit oriented educators who argue that students need to know the “basics” before advancing to creative units. Indeed, the students’ knowledge of poetic forms and diction was reported by the teacher to be at the novice level at best before the unit.

It is important to note that although some students chose not to have their work shared with researchers, there were no complaints from students or parents concerning the use of an LGBTQ themed text as part of the curriculum. The ability of students to engage with a text that chronicled such a brutal hate crime stands in opposition to those who would argue that LGBTQ themed texts have no place in public schools. Furthermore, it would be unconscionable to neglect to mention that it may not be possible to teach this unit in eight states (Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah) that currently have “no promo homo laws” that place various restrictions and prohibitions on teachers from discussing LGBTQ issues (GLSEN, n.d.). Although the country continues its move toward equal rights for people who identify as LGBTQ, there are still many places where it is dangerous to be different, and many schools where teachers could lose their jobs for addressing LGBTQ issues in the classroom. This study adds to the work of other studies that have featured LGBTQ themed texts (e.g. Athanases, 1996; Schall & Kaufmann, 2003; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009) and strongly argues that students are not only willing, but able and excited to tackle topics of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Time is always a major consideration when teaching. This unit, which lasted only one instructional month, was severely limited by a testing driven school calendar. Although we find it extraordinary that juniors and seniors invested so much intellectual and emotional energy into a project during the last month of school, it is not possible to know whether or not the students’ passion for poetry or outrage at social injustices continued. In ideal circumstances this unit would begin earlier in the school year, last at least an

entire quarter, include ancillary texts, and allow students multiple avenues for publication including digital tools. Furthermore, this unit could be reproduced using other books of poetry as mentor texts and could even use musical mentor texts in the form of concept albums such as Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, Styx’s *Paradise Theater*, or Prince Paul’s *A Prince among Thieves*.

In order to remain as unobtrusive as possible, researchers did not observe or record instruction, classroom discussions, or small groups negotiating and working on their projects. This decision limited this study’s focus to only the students’ works of poetry. Future research into students’ engagement with poetry and social justice could include analysis of student discussions and perhaps include student interviews to shed more light on individual experiences. Furthermore, this unit did not attempt to quantitatively measure any increases in knowledge of poetry, knowledge of social justice issues, or attitudes toward engaging in social justice.

### Implications

The success of this unit, which engaged adolescents in an extended interaction with poetry, has numerous implications for education. Perhaps the most critical one is that the final project in this unit of study, student composed poetry, stands diametrically opposed to the curriculum that is being forced upon many English teachers around the country in an attempt to increase standardized test scores. The elements of this unit—students learning about poetry and social justice, students choosing their own topics, and students writing their own poetry—is what Bloom (1956) identified as the highest level of learning: synthesis. This level of complexity is a stark contrast to what may be tested for Common Core State Standards where test items available on Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (2015) and Smarter Balanced (n.d.) websites show a predominance of activities that fall into the lowest levels of Bloom’s taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, and application.

The high levels of student engagement and learning that occurred also challenge the common phenomenon in educational calendars where

authentic teaching happens “after testing.” Many teachers have complained about this phenomenon and about the frenzy of test preparation that occurs in the months preceding standardized exams, often known by euphemisms such as “crunch time.” These months transform schools into test preparation centers and marginalize or eliminate authentic instruction. As the pandemic of testing and scripted curricula spreads across school districts, educators and researchers should provide a loud counter narrative to the commercially profitable yet inauthentic learning that is often passed off as quality instruction.

The students in this unit mastered many elements of poetic form, and it is important to note that social justice education and more traditional/tested approaches that would be considered formalist or new criticism are not mutually exclusive. Ideally, future research would empirically examine the differences between scripted curricula and authentic instruction on variables such as student performance, time on task, attendance, and discipline referrals.

A reflection of the intersections among the teacher, the text, and the learning context has numerous implications for teacher preparation. Guillermo has a wealth of knowledge of poetry and social justice, and he was excited to connect the two in his classroom. Unfortunately, not all teachers have the same kind of confidence and/or competence in the teaching of poetry or focusing instruction on issues of social justice. Although many teacher preparation programs are social justice oriented, others subscribe to a “standards based” paradigm where preparation is focused, perhaps even prescriptively, on satisfying standards that are checked off dutifully when designing instruction.

On the other hand, the student poets' commitments to address issues of social justice give strong credence to those who advocate that social justice education should be the cornerstone of English language arts teacher education preparation (Alsup & Miller, 2014). Although standards can change, elements of quality instruction, including engaging material, student choice, relevant topics, and giving students a chance to discuss their work amongst themselves,

do not. We argue that quality instruction always satisfies a multitude of standards.

The ability of Guillermo to manage classroom discussions dealing with topics such as genital mutilation, rape, racism, LGBTQ rights, and even suicide, which had personally impacted his students during instruction, was critical to the success of this unit. Teacher education programs should ensure that pre-service teachers are well versed in sensitive and/or controversial issues that could arise during teaching; furthermore, they should be prepared to handle discussions of these topics. Broaching these subjects could be addressed in numerous types of methods and classroom management courses. Specifically for pre-service English language arts teachers, English Education programs should include elements of dialogic instruction in methods and/or content classes so that teachers can use controversial classroom discussions as an effective instructional tool (e.g., Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013; Nystrand, 1997; O'Donnell, 2011).

Beyond the dialogue of student voices in the classroom, this unit featured an intertextual dialogue among the text of students' discussions, the text of their poetry, and the text of *October Mourning*, which in many ways was the lynchpin of the instruction of this unit. The success of the unit adds to the body of knowledge that espouses the use of mentor texts in English language arts (e.g., Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007; Mendez-Newman, 2012), and teacher preparation programs should share strategies with preservice teachers for using mentor texts in a variety of instructional situations.

All of the aforementioned ideas for improving the preparation of pre-service teachers could also be offered to in-service teachers as professional development; however, many school districts would need to reassess their stances on controversial issues for this to occur. Consider the myriad school districts where teaching an LGBTQ text could be career suicide for a teacher. Moreover, many schools forbid teachers from discussing specific events such as the Trayvon Martin case, constitutional amendments related to gay marriage, and issues concerning the decriminalization and/or legalization of marijuana. Accepting a whitewashed curriculum implies that we expect students to

graduate from high school and intelligently navigate the malaise of our local, social, economic, political and global communities without ever having an opportunity to read, write, think and discuss these issues in a safe, scholarly, and respectful environment. This study presents an oppositional perspective, and suggests that although social justice begins with consciousness, the ultimate goal of English language arts instruction should be informed, positive social action and change.

The fact that *October Mourning* is an LGBTQ themed text also has important considerations for teacher education and for school systems. Some researchers have found that pre-service and in-service teachers are reticent to use LGBTQ themed texts and/or to engage in discussions about gay rights and homophobia (Haertling-Thein, 2013; Malo-Juvera, 2015). If texts such as *October Mourning* are to be used in classrooms, teacher education programs need to include the use of LGBTQ themed materials with pre-service teachers across all grade levels and specializations. Specifically, English education and literacy programs should expose pre-service teachers to LGBTQ themed texts that would be age appropriate from the earliest moments in training.

## Conclusion

Because of the success of this unit in classes with pre-service and in-service teachers, we were excited at the possibilities of moving this unit to the secondary level. We hope that, beyond presenting a unit of study, other teachers can duplicate or modify in their own classrooms. We have offered an insightful look at the investment students are willing to make when addressing social justice issues in English language arts classrooms. The students in this study eagerly provided a counter narrative to many instances of oppression, sometimes sanctioned, that infuriated them. Ultimately, we hope that we have shown that social justice education has rigor and that we have added to the field of knowledge that presents alternatives to commercially produced curricula that threaten to turn public school English classrooms into sanitized test preparation factories. Life is not sanitized, and a sanitized curriculum does not engage students, or prepare them for life.

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**Table 1**  
**Negotiation of Themes**

Researcher 1	Researcher 2	Agreed Theme
Man vs. Society	Oppression	<i>The Individual vs. Society</i>
Gender/Class Imbalances	Outrage	<i>Subjugation of Women</i>
Money as Evil	Money as Power and Privilege	<i>The Corrupting Influence of Money</i>
Suicide	Suicide	<i>Suicide</i>
Male Assailant – No Remorse		Collapsed into <i>Subjugation of Women</i>
God		Other Theme
Tool Poems	Point of View Poems	Other Theme
	Racism	Collapsed into <i>The Individual vs. Society</i>
	Dehumanization	Collapsed into <i>Subjugation of Women</i>
Bullying	Bullying	Other Theme

**Table 2**  
**Overview of Student Poetry Projects, Topics, & Themes**

Title	# of Poems	Subject	Themes
<i>Chained</i>	12	Kidnapping and ongoing sexual abuse of three women by Ariel Castro	Subjugation of Women; Suicide; God
<i>Taken</i>	14	Kidnapping and ongoing sexual abuse of three women by Ariel Castro	Subjugation of Women
<i>Nigerian Girls Kidnapped!</i>	12	Kidnapping of 240 female Nigerian students by Boko Haram	Individual vs. Society; Subjugation of Women; Corrupting Influence of Money
<i>Untitled: Jimmy Ryce</i>	12	Kidnapping, rape and murder of 10 year old boy	
<i>An Unhappy Marriage</i>	13	Domestic abuse and suicide of	Subjugation of Women; Suicide; God
<i>Same Love is Shame Love</i>	12	Life and suicide of Jeffrey Zgut, a 20 year old gay young adult	Individual vs. Society; Suicide; Bullying
<i>Ramon Sampedro</i>	15	Assisted suicide of paralyzed man	Individual vs. Society; Suicide
<i>In the Sea</i>	15	Cuban Emigration	Individual vs. Society
<i>Air Pollution in Shanghai</i>	12	Industrial air pollution	Individual vs. Society; Corrupting Influence of Money
<i>Affluenza</i>	12	Legal defense of Ethan Couch arguing his life of privilege was to blame for his actions	Subjugation of Women; Corrupting Influence of Money
<i>The Road Last Traveled</i>	15	Trayvon Martin killing	Individual vs. Society
<i>Ending Cycle</i>	12	Suicide of Brandon Teena, a transgender man	Individual vs. Society; Suicide; Bullying
<i>Bullied into Anorexia</i>	11	Experience of Kylie Hortop who was bullied and developed eating disorders	Subjugation of Women; Bullying
<i>Living Up to the Impossible Ideals of Society</i>	12	Girls trying to adhere to society's definitions of beauty	Individual vs. Society; Subjugation of Women
<i>FGM Horror Stories</i>	14	Female genital mutilation	Individual vs. Society; Subjugation of Women; Corrupting Influence of Money
<i>Malala</i>	16	Shooting of Pakistani educational activist	Subjugation of Women
<i>Caustic Childhoods</i>	15	Challenges children face such as	Suicide

		depression, self-harm, and substance abuse	
<i>Untitled: Poetry Project on Social Justice</i>	12	Depression and suicide	Suicide
<i>The Life of a Jew</i>	12	Poetic retelling of Elie Wiesel's <i>Night</i>	Individual vs. Society; God