

Recognizing Lives In The Margins: Preparing Secondary English Preservice Teachers To Engender Wholeness And Build For Justice

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I exist in the margins. But growing up in the San Fernando Valley, as my family made our weekly trips into Los Angeles to visit cousins and run errands, I wouldn't have known that. Once we crossed into what is now Thai Town, storefront signs for restaurants, hair salons, and grocery stores were written in familiar Thai script, and people spoke the same way we spoke in my home. Because my family and I participated in such a vibrant and rich immigrant community, I grew up embraced by Thai culture. And while we had to drive half an hour from the suburbs into the city to be wrapped in it, as a child the distance didn't occur to me as something we moved into and out of—it was just an extension of the language and food and practices in our home. It wasn't until I got to school that I realized my family and I live on the margins, on the periphery of mainstream Eurocentric white culture.

On the weekends I was enmeshed in Thai culture, and on the weekdays I participated in the culture of school, with its attendant “technologies” (Zembylas, 2010, p. 253) and “highly stylized environment” (Jackson, 1990, p. 6) that “provide[d] a fairly constant social context” (p. 7). In school, I was to compete with others for top grades while at home I worked with my brother as we explored the world around us. Not only did I learn how to behave in particular ways and what was valued in school, I also learned that we only read and learned about particular people, people who didn't look like me or speak the same language. High school was the first time that I read a book about anyone remotely from the part of the world where my family is from. Now, when someone thinks I'm East Asian, I quickly disabuse them of that notion. But the summer before 9th grade when we were assigned to read *The Joy Luck Club* about a group of Chinese

mothers and daughters living in the United States, I was enamored: finally a book that spoke of experiences I had. My experiences in the margins were brought to the center as we read Tan's text.¹

Like many English teachers, I became one despite my memories of English class, and not because of them. Part of my frustration as a high school and college student of English was feeling like I was never fully seen. Yet I have always considered living on the margins “not a privileged position, but ... an advantaged one” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 271), because my daily existence moves between multiple spaces and consciousnesses as I toggle between the culture of my home and the culture of the world outside of it. Recently, this “multiple-consciousness perspective and view from the liminal” (ibid.) has served to make me more aware of what secondary English students take on and give up as they move through school when their home and cultural knowledge differ—and sometimes conflict—with that of the school. Rather than moving away from these differences as I was taught to do as a student, I now study how to move towards them and how secondary English teacher educators can prepare preservice teachers to do the same.

As a doctoral candidate who identifies as Asian American, who studies how we train secondary English preservice teachers (PSTs), and who also teaches methods classes, it is important that the PSTs who learn beside me in our classes take a color-ful (cf, Rolón-Dow, 2005) approach to learning how to teach rather than a color-blind one (Bonilla-Silva, 2015) in order to make sure students are seen in their wholeness, and not just in the margins in ways conventionally valued in school. One way in which teacher educators can help PSTs acknowledge and leverage their own and their students' racial, cultural, and ethnic identities is recognizing our full selves in curricular selections and therefore enacting justice in English Language Arts classrooms.

A take on justice

While conventional notions of justice describe transactional relationships between people and institutions (Ladson-Billings, 2015), more capacious understandings of justice, that draw on a recognition of other people's full humanness (Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2015;

¹ Yet this was also summer reading, which we were tested on, but didn't really discuss in class.

Stevenson, 2015), can help teacher educators and preservice teachers enact justice in their classrooms.

In the United States, conventional notions of justice describe relationships people have to institutions—like schools—that affect them and with which they interact (Ladson-Billings, 2015); these notions of justice often privilege individual rights and describe what individuals are owed from institutions. Operating under assumptions that particular individuals are “deserving” of these rights, these institutions have centered and enacted majoritarian—and racist—ideas that support inequities in housing, healthcare, employment, wealth, policing, and education.

In order to work towards more equitable structures, perhaps we need to reconsider how we understand justice. More expansive notions of justice describe the relationship we have to one another (Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2015; Stevenson, 2015) and in ways we seek to recognize each other’s full humanity through those relationships. These notions of justice maintain that we are full human beings and seek to leverage that knowledge in our interactions with each other and with the institutions that support our lives. Rather than seeing individuals as monoliths whose experiences with the world are the same, and thus need the same kind of institutional support, these notions of justice take into account all of our identities and experiences, including those that occur at the center and in the margins. Engaging in justice and recognizing our full (Kendi, 2019) and “reciprocal humanity” (Stevenson, 2015, p. 290), includes privileging epistemologies that honor students and scholars who hold a “multiple-consciousness perspective and view from the liminal” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 271). This includes specifically a notion of racial justice, which acknowledges diversity of voices and experiences conventionally pushed to the margins.

In the field of education, Moje (2007) makes the distinction between teaching for justice, and teaching about justice. In teaching for justice, all students have “equitable opportunities to learn;” are provided equal resources for learning; and learn conventional practices of the discipline (p. 3). The latter, “teaching to produce social justice” (p. 3-4), means developing skills to question and offer change to knowledge that has already been established; this offers possibilities for transformation of the learner, and social and political contexts. Morrell (2005) makes a similar distinction: “English educators ... facilitate access to academic literacies ...

but it is also important [for students] to ... learn to analyze and deconstruct the dominant institutions (such as schools and the media) that they are forced to confront on a daily basis” (p. 314). The distinction between teaching *for* and *about* justice highlights that the work teachers do in classrooms includes what is taught (i.e., curricula about justice) and how it is taught and assessed (i.e., pedagogy and assessment that is just).

Thus, justice expresses the relationship we have to each other and the institutions with which we interact. It includes an acknowledgement of our full humanity, foregrounding our racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, in order to make those views visible so that we no longer valorize and privilege a white and western perspective of the world. Surfacing and including other world views helps to make whole what has been neglected, and thus enacts justice. This wholeness can be created in the classroom in teaching for and about justice. This distinction allows teachers and students opportunities to access conventional disciplinary practices, but also ways to deconstruct and analyze those practices, giving room to practices that have been silenced and ignored. As we build wholeness in recognizing our multifaceted identities, we enact justice.

Justice in English Language Arts through Curricular Choices

Engendering wholeness by teaching for justice

Engendering wholeness in English class, and thus working towards justice, includes preparing secondary English Language Arts (ELA) preservice teachers (PSTs) to make decisions in the classroom that privilege teaching for justice. While these decisions can be actualized in the pedagogical, assessment, and curricular choices methods instructors teach PSTs to make, I focus on text selection: who is valorized, who is left out, and how these choices enable or undermine capacities for recognizing students’ wholeness. If our teaching is to enact justice, all students need “equitable opportunities to learn” (Moje, 2007, p. 3). This includes helping PSTs to recognize and interrogate majoritarian perspectives that often dominate our ELA curricula and presenting and creating counterstories to center what was in the margins.

In teaching PSTs how to make curricular decisions that focus on teaching for justice, methods instructors work with PSTs who, in their classrooms, will be reading with their students a “pervasive set of texts that populate the syllabi and bookshelves of classrooms across America” (Macaluso & Macaluso, 2019, p. ix), including titles largely by and about white characters, such as “*Macbeth, To Kill a Mockingbird...Lord of the Flies...The Odyssey, Romeo and Juliet ... The Great Gatsby*” (Styslinger, 2017, p. xi-xii). While ELA texts can serve as mirrors and windows for students (Bishop, 1990), English curricula often disproportionately include texts that are mirrors for white students and windows for minoritized ones, reinforcing and reproducing majoritarian perspectives of the world. This incomplete picture fails to incorporate the diversity of stories, voices, and experiences that exist, and does not allow all students “equitable opportunities to learn” (Moje, 2005, p. 3) when the stories lack characters who reflect their lives. Centering and primarily privileging texts that can’t be windows for all students continues to leave minoritized students in the margins, fails to recognize the fullness of their humanity, and thus reproduces injustice.

Counterstories that introduce views and glimpses into the lives of those on the margins can surface experiential knowledge that uncovers and exposes how race and racism operate and persist (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These counterstories present different ways of being in the world and can give voice to those frequently minoritized, providing a mirror for them and a window for their majoritarian classmates. In teaching PSTs how to work with texts with their students that present different ways of being in the world, and in asking students to write their own stories, teachers can “make rich reading lives possible for *all of our students*” (Buehler, 2016, p. 6, emphasis original). To do so, “we must diversify our texts and our methods. We must respond to the needs of the individual students in our classrooms” (ibid.). Rather than presenting texts that offer one view of the world, teachers can help locate “the curriculum in students’ lives” (Christensen, 2009, p. 4). In reading books about a diversity of ideas and ways of life— using students’ lives as the texts—“tells them they matter—their lives, their ancestors’ lives are important ... we honor their heritage and their stories as worthy of study” (ibid.). Rather than only reading and offering perspectives on stories that are most often centered in ELA classrooms, surfacing and sharing counterstories that are less privileged helps to complete the picture for

students on the margins, and builds a more complete picture of those students for their majoritarian classmates. In teaching PSTs to select texts that present a diversity of voices, ELA teachers can teach for justice.

Engendering wholeness by teaching about justice

English teachers can also play an important role in teaching students *about* justice: English teachers and their teacher educators teach students how to read, discuss, and act on texts that address race, gender, sexuality, immigration, class, religion, and other identity topics. NCTE Past President Jocelyn Chadwick (2016) further remarked that not only do identity topics fill texts we teach, students are also asking to talk about these topics. The study of texts and themes of justice in English class also provides ways for students to vicariously explore important lessons, situations, and ideas they will encounter outside the English classroom (Rosenblatt, 1995; Shalaby, 2017) and allow opportunities to “analyze and deconstruct the dominant institutions (such as schools and the media) that they are forced to confront on a daily basis” (Morrell, 2005, p. 314). In studying texts that discuss topics of injustice, students have the opportunity to “to examine why things are unfair, to analyze the systemic roots of that injustice, and to use their writing to talk back” (Christensen, 2009, p. 4). Rather than being presented with one way that the world operates, teacher educators can teach their PSTs—who can present their students—with ways in which the world functions for those on the margins. In centering these experiences and teaching topics of justice and injustice, English classes can help to engender wholeness.

Yet despite the often clear connection to justice via texts about identity and power that students read and compose (Alsup & Miller, 2014), in a small survey of 300 high school ELA teachers on the purposes of literacy instruction, Mirra (2014) found that most teachers ranked “developing skills for post-secondary education,” “developing literacy skills,” and “fostering enjoyment for reading, writing, listening, and speaking” as top reasons for teaching English (p. 10). Attention to teaching about justice—and the many ways in which it can be defined and operationalized in the ELA classroom (Dover, 2013)—is not among the top reasons these teachers have for teaching English.

While helping students develop their literacy skills is indeed a role of

an education in English—and an example of teaching for justice as teachers help students socialize into disciplinary literacies—PSTs can also be taught to leverage knowledge of critical English education and critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Morrell, 2005), asking secondary students to surface and explore textual topics and themes of power and identity in order to help students interrogate and discuss these themes, solidifying a relationship between “language pedagogy, social consciousness, and individual liberation” (Morrell, 2005, p. 312). While learning practices of the discipline in order to participate in the literacies of the discipline is a worthwhile goal, it is one that serves the individual and neither acknowledges nor addresses structural racism that is reproduced in ELA classrooms. Further, replicating traditional disciplinary practices does not serve to disrupt cycles of injustice that continue to privilege colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2015) or whiteness, which traffic in avoidance, silence, and erasure. Teaching PSTs how to make curricular choices to “analyze and deconstruct,” challenge, and replace those practices can be goals of an ELA education about justice (Morrell, 2005, p. 314).

Methods instructors can prepare secondary ELA PSTs to teach their students for and about justice by helping them learn how to make choices in curricula and text selection that recognize the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of their students and center their ways of knowing in order to engender wholeness and thus enact justice.

Conclusion

I don't recall many books I read in high school, much less own them, but *The Joy Luck Club*, fragile now, the glue of the cover split from the spine, still has a place on my bookshelf. I remember coming across a passage when I realized that the characters mirrored my experiences: “My mother named me after the street that we lived on: Waverly Place Jong, my official name for important American documents. But my family called me Meimei, ‘Little Sister’” (Tan, 1989, p. 91-92). With my highlighter, I had noted the contrast between the speaker's “official name” and the name her family called her. My brother, too, calls me พี่, older, a name that refers to our relative birth order. My parents call me แก้วตา, and not Naitnaphit, my “official name for important American documents.” Even more than 20 years later I can still remember reading Tan's words, writing a note in the margins, and thinking, hey! That's like me. I have no other memories like

this from high school.

Bishop (1990) writes about the importance of having books for students that serve as “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” (p. 2). Windows “offer...views of the world that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange.” These windows can turn into sliding glass doors and readers can open and walk right through them into worlds created by authors. In the right light, Bishop writes, windows can also serve as mirrors: “literature transforms our human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.” In reading a book whose characters reflected my life, I saw that my family and our way of life could be acknowledged and valued in school, that they could be brought to the center rather than stay in the margins, that these experiences could, for my classmates, serve as windows into my life.

As we surface ideologies of Eurocentrism and white supremacy that undergird dominant perspectives of traditional secondary English texts, pedagogical, and assessment practices, we can take a color-ful approach (cf, Rolón-Dow, 2005) and avoid perpetuating a color-blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2015) one in the study and teaching of English.

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