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“The Voice Lies Within Them”: Teacher Candidates’ Conceptions of Literacy and Social Justice Pedagogy

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Abstract: This qualitative analysis of experiential reflections in two English methods courses considers the ways that perceptions of literacy can shape understandings of social justice and social justice pedagogy. Although social justice is an essential component of English teacher education, scholars are still attempting to transcend theoretical discussions into field experiences. Following a semester of justice-oriented readings and reflexive activities involving practicum placements including a community-engagement project in local schools, teacher candidates responded to open-ended questions related to literacy and social justice on post-course questionnaires. An ideological approach to literacy comprised of literacy events occurring in social contexts frames the research design and interpretations of participants’ responses. Findings illustrate respondents’ perceptions on a continuum between literacy as fixed and amenable to change. Although their understandings of social justice indicate a preference for embracing differences in students’ literacy practices and cultural backgrounds, transferring social justice pedagogy from theory to practice remains a significant challenge. These results hold implications for teacher education program stakeholders whose experiences can help actionize social justice in classrooms.

Keywords: English language arts, ideological literacy frameworks, social justice pedagogy, teacher education, sociocultural constructs



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Introduction¹

Social justice pedagogy is a core pursuit of many teacher education programs across the U.S. and beyond, and the mission of preparing justice-minded educators is a vital component of democratic educational endeavors within the fields of English language arts (ELA) and literacy studies (Morrell, 2012). Because reflexivity and reflection are keys to improving praxis at any career stage, honoring and responding to the voices of students who are learning how to teach is essential for practitioners and scholars working in the field of teacher education, especially for those who are committed to leveraging literacy toward putting social justice into action (Smagorinsky et al., 2015). Likewise, during his address at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) 2018 General Assembly, author Christopher Emdin stated, "You cannot give anybody a voice--you recognize the fact that the voice lies within them" (NCTE, 2018). The present article's authors, Rick and Meghan, are ELA teacher educators who strive to showcase a commitment to language and literacy research and teaching that foregrounds social justice as actionable strategies within instruction and pedagogy. Bridging the gap between social justice theory and practice in literacy education involves understanding where students are in their experiences and understandings

of heavy concepts. Part of our vision for social justice in ELA is modeling for students how to stand in solidarity with BIPOC and LGBTQ communities who have historically and perpetually been the victims of oppression and marginalization enabled by White-power structures of systemic racism and colonialism in the U.S. By partnering with the communities we serve, we recognize that they do not need to be "fixed," that their sociocultural contexts are foundational assets on which partnerships can be sustained. We believe this journey begins by listening to our students.

As critically-engaged teacher educators, our work should prioritize the voices of prospective ELA teachers and respond to how they are articulating and enacting justice in their coursework and in their practice with K-12 learners. Our commitment to social justice is shaped by Moje's (2007) calls for thoughtful critique of the content teacher candidates (TCs) are asked to learn as well as the contexts surrounding those processes, including how the acquisition and performativity of knowledge is structured and the degree to which students' identities and backgrounds are visible in schools. We also ascribe to Bell (2007), who argues that TCs should develop an awareness of our collective

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this

article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

socialization within oppressive systems and a sense of agency to interrupt oppression in institutions. To this end, we aim with teacher education curricula to afford opportunities for reflection on historical and current societal injustices perpetuated in schools, while pursuing the disruption of those inequities (Bolick et al., 2019).

Although social justice is an essential component of ELA teacher education, scholars are still searching for ways to consistently transcend theoretical discussions within university classrooms and enact practices that influence K-12 students during field experiences in schools. This article describes our attempt in a recent study to tap into our TCs' voices to consider how their perceptions of literacy can shape understandings of social justice and social justice pedagogy. We begin by considering how social justice is understood in the teaching of ELA across the literature, including how these understandings are shaped by perspectives of literacy and catalyzed through reflective practices that prioritize student voices. We then outline literacy as ideological practice (Street, 1984) as the theoretical lens through which we analyze TCs' conceptions of social justice and literacy. Specifically, we inquire into the following research question in our efforts to heed Emdin's (2018) reminder that "the voice lies within them":

How do TCs' perceptions of literacy shape their understandings of social justice and the possibilities of social justice pedagogy?

Findings suggest that TCs considered literacy to fall in a continuum between two disparate categories: *Literacy as Fixed* and *Literacy as Amenable to Change*.

TCs' perceptions of literacy have implications for how they conceived of social justice and the potential they envision for enacting social justice pedagogy in the ELA classroom. We hope this article offers teacher educators a blueprint for leveraging TCs' ideas about literacy toward transforming discussions of social justice as a theoretical construct into action for students, schools, and communities.

Social Justice Approaches in ELA

Cochran-Smith et al. (2010) note that although social justice causes have been taken up in different ways to support various populations over time, "challenging the inequities of school and society" (p. 37) has remained a unifying objective for U.S. educators. From the Black educators in the Jim Crow South who acted as "secret social justice advocates" (Smathers Library Gallery, 2018) to LGBTQ teachers who fought the National Education Association for fair union representation (Graves, 2015), social justice education in the U.S. has largely reflected societal movements (Zeichner, 2011). Recently, educators have risen up to disrupt myriad injustices by organizing teach-ins along the U.S.-Mexico border (Camera, 2019), spearheading nationwide teacher walkouts for suitable compensation (Catte & Salfia, 2018), galvanizing social media campaigns such as #DisruptTexts (Ebarvia et al., 2018), and examining pedagogies of those who teach students with exceptionalities (Mundorf et al., 2019). Justice continues to be carried out in and around the field of education via numerous new platforms (Carruthers, 2018).

Literacy scholars and educators have particularly engaged in teaching practices through which social

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justice is modeled through endeavors of abolition and activism (Love, 2019). The charge of social justice in ELA teacher education has been led by NCTE's Commission on Social Justice in Teacher Education Programs (n.d.), whose members ground their work "in the belief that it is impossible to make sense of the field of English language arts without using gender, race, and class (among others) as central categories of description and analysis" (para. 3). Scholars have pinpointed this sharpened criticality of sociocultural contexts as a key determiner in distinguishing social justice pedagogy from socially-just pedagogy (Ball & Wilson, 1996). This distinction involves the recognition that it is simply not good enough to teach about diversity, equity, and inclusion; instead, our practices must embrace student voices and be reflective of their cultural and linguistic identities. As Muhammad (2020) guides us, no literacy education can be truly responsive until it champions power and equity by acknowledging historical and cultural oppression in and out of school. As such, the English Language Arts Teacher Educators group within NCTE recognizes each student's equal right to a fair and just education as a bare-minimum construct, while exploring the function of identities and diversity, and considering opportunities for enacting transformation that begins in educative spaces and transcends beyond institutional borders (justice.education, 2020).

Widening TCs' pedagogical perspectives to include justice-oriented considerations alongside the delivery of ELA content is often initiated by teacher educators who introduce social justice topics through readings and discussions in methods coursework. Cultivating empathetic stances by examining histories of racial oppression (Freire, 1994), establishing culturally relevant teaching practices

(Gay, 2010), and rearranging curricular priorities to account for students' diverse life experiences (Sleeter, 2005) are examples that frequently comprise early units. Although incorporating foundational readings into methods syllabi and assessing the integration of justice-driven principles in TCs' learning designs are vital components of ELA teacher education, the field needs to move beyond theoretical discussions to include more opportunities for practice (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Hoyle (2018) argues that providing historical and theoretical underpinnings of social justice is a productive starting point, yet teacher educators must "prepare teachers to understand what social justice would look like, the product" (p. 3). TCs benefit from live-classroom experiences with students through university-school-community

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partnerships that allow multiple stakeholders to cohere around social issues. Practicum placements afford opportunities for fresh physical spaces and student interactions, which help TCs transfer their university classroom discussions about justice as a concept into actionable strategies for schools and communities, such as

increasing racial literacy (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016) and implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Practicum teaching experiences where TCs put into practice and reflect on theoretical models of curriculum development learned in their coursework are integral to extending understandings of social justice from the university setting to classroom contexts. In their work with innovative practicum structures, Choi et al. (2020) argue that the development of self-efficacy in working with diverse learners and their communities is traceable through reflective practices that allow "PSTs the opportunity to express and elaborate on their experiences within

the classroom” (p. 108). ELA teacher educators have recently leveraged TCs’ practicum reflections toward enhancing their beliefs about teaching writing (Pytash & Testa, 2020) and entering the field with effective models of praxis (Smagorinsky et al., 2015). At the heart of reflective practices is the belief that TCs can learn about enacting social justice from interactions with students, communities, schools, and one another. In addition to prioritizing TC and K-16 student voices, teacher educators are able to edge TCs’ reflections toward understandings of social justice largely by how they define literacy and approach adolescents’ literacy practices in and out of school (Sarigianides, 2019). An expansive, action-oriented perspective of social justice is attainable through an expanded view on literacy and its role within the democratic purposes of schooling, specifically, the notion that all students are intelligent beings with their own unique voices, sociocultural contexts, and knowledge-bearing literacy practices who have the right to determine their own learning pathways and meaning-making.

Situating Literacy Instruction for Social Justice

By viewing literacy practices broadly, as constantly evolving phenomena comprised of social events that are multimodal, multidimensional, and situated in cultural and political worlds that are increasingly global, TCs are more likely to equate literacy education with social justice and facilitate justice-oriented literacy instruction. Literacy outcomes realized in school are directly connected to myriad cultural contexts surrounding meaning-making throughout adolescents’ homes and communities (Scribner & Cole, 1981). ELA teachers are charged with helping students navigate dynamic landscapes

where identities and communication are continually reshaped through practices involving texts (Petroni et al., 2015). As these operations generate fluid truths of identity, agency, and power in learning environments, a large component of teacher educators’ work is helping TCs expand previous notions of literacy to include racially, linguistically, and culturally relevant texts and activities. In their review of social justice scholarship in ELA methods, Fowler-Amato et al. (2019) suggest, “opening up what counts as text, genre, language, and literacy practice has the potential to support PTs in developing understandings about not only the young people they teach but also the communities that are home to these young people” (p. 171). By facilitating reflective

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practices and generating inclusive platforms for student voices to drive opportunities for discovery, teacher educators help TCs expand their notions of literacy, and subsequently, their conceptions of social justice work. As the connection between literacy and social justice is so profound in ELA settings, supporting TCs’ expanded understandings of literacy practices is, in itself, a form of justice teaching.

Conceptual Framework

Our critically-minded research and teaching is founded on Street’s (1984) ideological approach to literacy that situates literacy at the intersections of discrete aspects of reading and writing, literacy events, and literacy practices. Unlike an autonomous approach wherein literacy is defined as the concrete skills of reading and writing removed from social context (Olson, 1988), an ideological perspective considers technical and cognitive aspects of reading and writing as they are enacted by social inhabitants within cultural structures (Street, 1984). Although

inclusive of elements of the autonomous model, an ideological approach to literacy refers broadly to ways that individuals use a “range of context-specific practices and ways of interacting with the social environment” (Auerbach, 1992, p. 73) to make meaning of the world.

Literacy can be further delineated into events and practices. Literacy events refer to “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (Heath, 1983, p. 93). In classrooms, for instance, texts are often used to mediate students’ interpretive processes (Maybin, 2000). Conversely, literacy practices refer to reading and writing behaviors and conceptualizations of meaning (Street, 1984). Literacy practices include the ways literacy events are situated within peoples’ beliefs and understandings about the world (Maybin, 2000) and are saturated with ideology because they may challenge dominant discourses, shift conceptions of “proper” or “correct” literacy, and entail struggles for power and position. Literacy as an ideological practice positions reading and writing within larger, power-laden contexts and holds implications for ELA teacher preparation.

As literacy practices are embedded in changing sociocultural contexts, we take an ideological approach to literacy to outline pedagogical elements that are essential to learning within dynamic, diverse settings. We also consider literacy to be a framework to promote participation and interaction, to include a variety of text modes, to position students as constructors of knowledge, and to be a tool for analyzing and promoting equity and culturally sustaining practices. While instructional methods that lean more toward autonomous characterization can certainly result in effective teaching, we believe that culturally and linguistically diverse students, whose language and literacy practices are often absent or discounted in mainstream curricula,

respond best to literacy education that affords them opportunities to embrace their identities (Muhammad, 2020). This commitment to ideological approaches can position literacy educators to be more attuned to justice-oriented teaching and frames our inquiry into the relationship between TCs’ perceptions of literacy and social justice.

Method

In the following section, we outline the methods undertaken in our study, beginning with a description of the contexts and participants, moving into a statement regarding our course objectives, and finally, illustrating the details of our data collection and analysis.

Context & Participants

Rick and Meghan co-developed their respective undergraduate ELA methods courses to reflect justice-driven academic objectives, learning materials, and pedagogical components. These core aspects represent our commitment to teaching literacy and preparing literacy educators through a social justice lens that prioritizes solidarity over involvement and allyship over acknowledgement (Barnes & Marlatt, 2020). Rick identifies as a White male who teaches at a Hispanic Serving Institution in the Southwest U.S. where all 12 enrolled TCs consented to participate in the study. Students’ self-identified racial demographics reflect the university’s regional Borderland contexts; six TCs identified as Latinx, four as White, one as Asian American, and one as Black. Seven TCs identified as male, five as female. Meghan identifies as a White female who teaches at a public university in the Southeast U.S., where all eight TCs offered consent. The TCs’ gender and racial self-identifications align with those of practicing teachers throughout the U.S.; six TCs identified as women, two as men. Six TCs identified as White, one as Black, and one as Asian American.

Table 1

Teacher Education Questionnaire

Q. 1	What does social justice mean?
Q. 2	What does it mean to be a social justice-oriented teacher?
Q. 3	Explain your stance on taking a social justice-oriented approach on teaching ELA.
Q. 4	What is an example of a social justice-driven approach in teaching ELA? (this could be something you've observed this semester or prior, something you've tried on your own, or an idea you'd like to try)
Q. 5	Explain what makes this approach socially just.
Q. 6	How does a social justice approach influence student learning and achievement?
Q. 7	What is a text?
Q. 8	What are examples of texts?
Q. 9	What does literacy mean to you, as a prospective ELA teacher?
Q. 10	What are examples whereby someone might demonstrate literacy?
Q. 11	What does it mean to be a community-engaged teacher?
Q. 12	In what ways is community engagement important (or not) in your future teaching?
Q. 13	In what ways is community engagement important (or not) for student learning?
Q. 14	What are examples of community-engaged teaching that you've observed, experienced, or developed this semester?

As both Rick and Meghan share personal and institutional commitments to the students we serve, especially culturally and linguistically diverse students, we have included social identity details as an act of solidarity and in support of the diversification of the teaching workforce (Sleeter, 2001). Both methods courses are taken by senior level students during their final semester prior to student teaching. TCs in both programs attend weekly class meetings and complete a practicum experience in secondary schools.

One of the primary goals of our courses is to support TCs' critical analysis of how social justice and literacy manifest in schools, and we carefully select texts that encourage TCs to embrace both the curricular design components of their profession as well as aspects of action research. In addition to foundational readings on designing ELA instructional units (Smagorinsky,

2019) and engaging in reflexivity through practitioner research methods (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006), our core texts target learning objectives grounded in understanding social justice literacies in theory and practice (Boyd, 2017). Throughout the semester, TCs complete readings and activities that support their analysis of diverse literacy practices (Matteson & Boyd, 2017); promote empathy in our implementation of digital literacies with adolescents (Frey et al., 2009); cultivate literacy-based relationships with students of color (Golden & Womack, 2016); prioritize community engagement alongside developing pedagogies (Haddix, 2015); and embody dispositions for solidarity with multilingual learners (Hickey, 2018). Finally, drawing upon these texts and topics, TCs complete a semester-long community-engagement project wherein they research a topic significant to localized contexts of their practicum school community. Social justice is not merely a

collection of theories we discuss in university classrooms as a construct separate from our actual work with students; it should be modeled as practices we carry out alongside students in their communities. We believe the ideological conception of literacy with which we approach our courses compliments intentional inclusion of student voices and reflective practices, all of which foreground our justice-driven objectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data corpus for this study includes TCs' video-recorded reflections collected throughout the semester, final project presentations, and post-project questionnaires. In light of our research question, we focus on questionnaire data to ascertain how TCs' perceptions of literacy shaped their understanding of social justice and social justice pedagogy. This questionnaire (Table 1) was administered via Google Forms at the end of the semester. The instrument was co-developed by the researchers and featured open-ended questions about TCs' perspectives and experiences related to justice-oriented literacy teaching practices. These questions were devised according to recommendations from NCTE's Commission on Social Justice in Teacher Education Programs, which outline reflective, generative conversation starters for ELA teacher educators looking to encourage TCs to explore identities, diversities, and transformation in their developing pedagogies (justice.education, 2020).

Rick and Meghan engaged in ongoing, iterative data analysis following course completion. We began by reading through TCs' questionnaire responses and noting our first impressions. We then moved into a first round of thematic coding to develop initial codes, and after a follow-up conversation to calibrate our interpretations, we engaged in a second round of coding and collapsed codes into categories (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). The work of generating analytical structures was informed by our conceptual framework, specifically, that applications of social justice can be framed in part through a continuum along Street's (1984) distinction between autonomous and ideological notions of literacy. Codes and categories represented TCs' diverse and wide-ranging statements that seemed to be situated at axis points between the extreme endpoints of autonomous and ideological. As our analysis aims to represent TCs' complex ideas pertaining to social justice realities as emblematic of their perspectives of texts, ELA, and literacy operations in and out of school, we organized our findings into two sections: *Literacy as Fixed* and *Literacy as Amenable to Change*. These two overarching themes include numerous codes that all connect in varying degrees with social justice tenets, included in the preceding review of literature and scholarship. Table 2 illustrates our categories, codes, and the frequencies with which codes were applied across the responses.

Findings

In the following section, we present our findings, which we have divided into two sections: *Literacy as Fixed* and *Literacy as Amenable to Change*.

Section One: Literacy as Fixed

The first section is organized into two categories: *Consumption of Texts* and *Privileging the Normalized*. For each category, we present codes and data samples.

Consumption of Texts

The *Consumption of Texts* category contains two themes: "Reinforcing Existing Knowledge" and "Equality." "Reinforcing Existing Knowledge" totaled a frequency of 41, and "Equality" totaled a frequency

Table 2**Category and Code Frequencies**

Section 1: Literacy as Fixed	
Code	Frequency
<i>Category #1: Consumption of Texts</i>	
Reinforcing Existing Knowledge	41
Equality	14
Total	55
<i>Category #2: Privileging the Normalized</i>	
Prioritizing School Sanctioned Literacy Practices	20
Accommodations	14
Total	34
Section 2: Literacy as Amenable to Change	
Code	Frequency
<i>Category #1: Production of Texts</i>	
Creation of New Knowledge and Meaning	15
Action and Empowerment	13
Cultivating Critical Consciousness	23
Total	51
<i>Category #2: Multiple Modes and Purposes</i>	
Literacies Exist Outside of School and are Digitized	33
Equity and Inclusivity	22
Total	55

of 14. Altogether, the category of *Consumption of Texts* tabulated a total frequency of 55.

Reinforcing Existing Knowledge. TCs' statements suggest that they perceived knowledge to be fixed, rather than constructed or contextual. They offered approaches to teaching ELA that included leveraging students' perspectives by "sharing their own stories" and including "cultural sources," featuring current events such as the Trump Impeachment to "allow them freedom in incorporating news and popular culture," and selecting "diverse literature" that "represents all backgrounds" and allows students to be "represented and heard." While many responses offered broad descriptions of texts that focus on "issues of color" or "Native American Literature," specific titles that "bring social justice issues to life" were also mentioned (e.g., *All American Boys* and *The Hate U Give*). A few responses such as "students need to learn from us" and "we have the knowledge they need" were more teacher-centric, indicative of a preference for centralizing power in the classroom. While these codes mostly suggest well-intentioned deference to the voices and interests of students, they also prioritize scaffolding those experiences toward consumption of texts within the accepted body of ELA knowledge rather than promoting the construction of new knowledge (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

TCs offered passive definitions of texts such as "written materials" that can be "read," "viewed," "analyzed" or are "meant to provoke a response." Their definitions of literacy were equally static, with literates "being able to read and comprehend materials being taught" and "engaging with the subject verbally." TCs largely prescribed consumption as the means through which literacy is demonstrated, further corroborating their preference for existing knowledge. One TC wrote that literacy can be showcased by writing a "report about a novel's chapter. They need to be able to read it, then

comprehend and understand its message. Writing about it allows them to demonstrate what they learned.” Other responses such as “determine bias in an article,” “using skills to pull out meaning,” and responding to “multiple choice questions based on concepts of a text” offer a range of ELA aptitudes. However, these statements consistently portray literacy as something that happens to students rather than with them, an operation that is performed *on them* rather than *by them* (Street, 1984).

Together, TCs’ perceptions of knowledge as fixed and texts as passive, suggest they viewed literacy as autonomous, rather than ideological practice (Street, 1984). These consumptive skills and operations mentioned by TCs illustrate ideas about learners that are more receptive than generative, and while we recognize that justice-oriented teaching is still possible through disciplinary-driven subject matter instruction, we hope that TCs are eventually able to sophisticate and expand their notions of what literacy practices can be (Moje, 2007).

Equality. TCs were similarly concerned with sameness. TCs defined social justice as a communal commodity “equally distributed among everyone” and as a “philosophy of equal opportunity, wealth, and privilege in a society.” Other definitions more closely revealed TCs’ perceptions of social justice teaching as “holding all students to a high standard and then providing opportunities to meet this standard” and “advocating for all your students without taking their backgrounds into consideration.” One TC believed that a justice-oriented teacher is one who ensures all students are “receiving equal education. There will always be students of every shape, color, size, and background. That shouldn’t impact how you teach them. You need to make sure every student is receiving the exact same effort and support from you.” Although committed to fairness, these responses indicate TCs’ privileging of uniformity. In suggesting all students

should be treated equally, regardless of their identities, these TCs further bolster their perceptions of literacy as autonomous: centered around discrete practices of reading and writing and consumption of existing knowledge.

Privileging the Normalized

The *Privileging the Normalized* category contains two themes: “Prioritizing School Sanctioned Literacy Practices” and “Accommodations.” “Prioritizing School Sanctioned Literacy Practices” totaled a frequency of 20, and “Accommodations” totaled a frequency of 14. Altogether, the category of *Privileging the Normalized* tabulated a total frequency of 34.

Prioritizing School-Sanctioned Literacy Practices. TCs exhibited dependence on alphanumeric texts and word-based thinking. Although their reflections reveal an understanding of how curriculum, instruction, and assessment have been facilitated through “standardized texts,” “reading comprehension quizzes,” and building “robust and meaningful vocabulary,” TCs’ remarks in the *normalized* category offer a narrow conception of possibilities for texts and literacy operations (Fowler-Amato et al., 2019). TCs offered Eurocentric, White male authors (e.g., Shakespeare and Locke), as examples of texts that students should comprehend to demonstrate literacy. Not only did TCs disregard concerns of interest and relevance for students (Frankel et al., 2018), they also suggested that the most effective way to demonstrate understanding of texts is through formal writing, discounting the wealth of meaning-making tools students regularly apply outside school.

Accommodations. A small number of TCs’ beliefs about accommodations appeared to fall in line with assimilation into normalized systems of literacy and schooling. One TC described “offering extra help for

students who may not be on par with reading skills so they won't fall behind in the lesson." Most TCs appeared to accommodate from a genuine desire to help students reach their utmost potential. One TC wrote, "To be a social justice-oriented teacher means to recognize and make adjustments to your teaching and treatment of students based on their needs and backgrounds." Another wrote, "Students aren't going to understand every concept because every student has strengths and weaknesses. I should find ways to support these students and promote growth in areas of weakness, instead of simply trying to raise their grade." An asset-based mindset is visible in these statements, which could indicate that adolescents' individual contexts are being considered, even if accepted academic competencies are the preferred measures of success (Gay, 2010).

Although TCs' language accommodations still largely align with literacy as a stationary concept, they did articulate a vision for mobility between languages (Hickey, 2018). Many TCs cited flexibility in language requirements as important interventions for justice-minded educators because "allowing English learners to write and speak in their native language instead of requiring them to use English only levels the playing field to ensure they can get the same grade as a student whose first language is English." 12 TCs specifically described language accommodations they had made in their practicum placements. One TC wrote, "I allowed students to complete assignments in English or Spanish and then present in the opposite language if they preferred." Another wrote, "I was able to help my students in Spanish if necessary, to ensure they completely understood the assignments." Although these empathetic approaches were rooted in academic achievement that "encourages students to engage on a whole new level" and "personalizes learning and allows them to explore the world around them," other responses demonstrated a more critical perspective. TCs outlined the "importance of multiple languages" and

"exploring their own experiences through their own tongues and stories." One TC wrote, "Requiring ELLs to only communicate in English implies that English is the superior language, when in reality, this is not true. This provides more justice by respecting and welcoming different languages and cultures." TCs who referred to literacy needs of language learners demonstrated an understanding of accommodations to support historically underserved populations (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994).

Although we hope for TCs to move beyond the reification of majoritarian ideas and take up approaches that disrupt normalized ways of knowing, their recognition of student diversity in language, readiness, and academic experiences indicates at least an emerging understanding of justice teaching. And while these statements reflect a positive outlook regarding equality and democratic stances, by viewing literacy as fixed, TCs limit their views of language and literacy competencies that their students can demonstrate and subsequently limit their ability to implement social justice theory into practice (Moje, 2007).

Section Two: Literacy as Amenable to Change

We now turn to those instances where TCs considered literacy to be amenable to change. This second section of results is divided into two categories: *Production of Texts* and *Multiple Modes and Purposes*.

Production of Texts

The *Production of Texts* category contains three themes: "Creation of New Knowledge and Meaning," which totaled a frequency of 15; "Action and Empowerment," which totaled a frequency of 13; and "Cultivating Critical Consciousness," which totaled a frequency of 23. Altogether, the category of *Production of Texts* tabulated a total frequency of 51.

Creation of New Knowledge and Meaning. TCs portrayed students as producers by highlighting their ability to “create texts in writing and by hand and mind.” The act of production with regard to texts and ideas differs from consumption because the role of authorship is assigned to students as opposed to traditional views of learners as passive and lacking knowledge only instructors can provide. By describing students as active producers who make meaning and construct texts through literacy practices, TCs shed light on their views of literacy as enacted and acted upon within social spheres (Street, 1984). TCs situated a creation-based approach to literacy within a student-driven curriculum that differed from teacher-centric approaches discussed in the previous section. Whereas some responses limited literacy operations to basic reading and writing, others illustrated expanded perspectives that helped to “give students diverse ways of showing their knowledge.” Instead of conceding to traditional text types such as articles and books, TCs defined texts as a “recorded medium that communicates a student’s message” and “interactive platforms” for students to “think critically” and “problem solve together.” Describing a daily open-forum writing activity his cooperating teacher facilitated, one TC wrote, “By putting the responsibility in the students’ hands, to choose how they want to meet objectives, they are able to reclaim some power over their own learning and share personal thoughts with you.” Another wrote, “Literacy is being knowledgeable and showing it in different ways beyond just reading and writing.” TCs allowed students agency with audience and purpose through “journal writing,” “narrative essays,” “research infographics,” and “short stories.” Unlike descriptions of adolescents as consumers, production-based responses placed creation in the hands of students and conveyed literacy practices as generative rather than consumptive, products that are constructed and disseminated *by students* and not *for students* (Street, 1984).

Action and Empowerment. TCs’ statements about social justice and literacy suggested that they viewed ELA instructors as positioned to leverage production of texts toward social change, both in their dispositions and practices, and in supporting students to enact change. TCs cited numerous projects they had designed or observed throughout the semester that helped “tie the course together with what’s going on in schools.” A drama unit featuring student-authored one-act plays, research papers including interviews with community members, and music videos promoting local business using rhetorical principles are a few examples TCs shared. In a narrative writing unit, one TC described a life-to-fiction exercise in which students fictionalized news events into short stories, challenging learners to “recognize [that] systems of oppression exist and take action to rectify that system” and “explore and attack injustices.” Another wrote, “A social justice-oriented teacher is an educator who behaves like an activist in promoting equity for their students and raising awareness about oppression.” TCs believed students’ textual production could catalyze opportunities for “diverse voices to plan the curriculum” and “foster the sharing of ideas,” which allows for investment in communities by prioritizing literacy practices of its members, particularly the meaning-making of adolescents (Matteson & Boyd, 2017).

Cultivating Critical Consciousness. TCs’ responses exhibited an awareness that differences in society are often exploited by those in power to control the powerless, and that this domination is often exercised through texts (Freire, 1994). Justice-driven literacy education was defined through phrases such as “advocating against injustices,” “disputing unfair community hierarchies,” and “rectifying oppressive systems in society.” Numerous TCs grounded their statements of critical consciousness in notions of privilege, initially through self-reflection and “paying attention to your own biases and actions.” One TC wrote, “To be a social-justice oriented teacher means

you have an understanding of your own privilege and take time to educate yourself on how to meet the needs of marginalized students.” Another wrote, “Students who enjoy privilege are offered new perspectives, and students who aren’t privileged are supported through accurate representation.” Several TCs embraced production of texts to teach “controversial topics” as a way to expose students to “counter-narratives” and “shape their own realities.” One TC wrote, “Literacy means more than the ability to read. It is a tool to learn about the world and ways to make it better.” During discussions, TCs also suggested framing a study of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* around atrocities experienced by migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, developing writing exercises on museum artifacts recalling forced removal of African American neighborhoods, and using podcasts to explore lives of minor characters in American literature. These approaches all share a similar rationale: to humanize through texts the dehumanized in society. As TCs developed critical consciousness about their students and communities, they simultaneously imagined pedagogical practices that could allow students to articulate their own critical perspectives (Petroni et al., 2015).

Multiple Modes and Purposes

The *Multiple Modes and Purposes* category contains two themes: “Literacies Exist Outside of School and are Digitized” and “Equity and Inclusivity.” “Literacies Exist Outside of School and are Digitized” totaled a frequency of 33, and “Equity and Inclusivity” totaled a frequency of 22. Altogether, the category of *Multiple Modes and Purposes* tabulated a total frequency of 55.

Literacies Exist Outside School and are Becoming Digitized. As presented in preceding sections, many TCs indicated a reliance on print-based, alpha-numeric texts and literacy practices. However, numerous statements acknowledged the growing importance of texts and operations rooted in home and social spaces, many of which are digitally composed (Kajder, 2010). “Digital art,” “film genres,” “performances,” “social media,” “body language,” and “virtual reality applications” were some text types TCs listed. One TC wrote, “Literacy is how you engage the world using skills you have from your life.” TCs observed a litany of home-based literacies being leveraged in their practicum such as “songs for shucking corn” and “oil change stories,” and numerous digital activities including “TikTok videos

“TCs took asset-oriented approaches to students by recognizing their meaning-making outside school as rich literacy practices that can extend ELA curriculum as a vehicle for change.”

to reenact *Romeo and Juliet*” and “creative mode in *Fortnite* to summarize the *Hunger Games*.” TCs took asset-oriented approaches to students by recognizing their meaning-making outside school as rich literacy practices that can extend ELA curriculum as a vehicle for change.

Equity and Inclusivity. TCs’ notions of multiple modes and purposes were further illustrated by their frequent referencing of equity, in which they acknowledged differences in students’ literacy practices as “evidence of a well-rounded education” and “an advantage rather than a deficit,” and by their descriptions of inclusivity, which emphasized “safe and welcoming classroom environments” that prioritized “all methods of expression.” Statements about equity were largely rooted in the work of “justice-committed teachers” and differed starkly from earlier discussions of equality, celebrations of diversity, or using knowledge funds as scaffolds. For many TCs, equitable representation extended beyond reflective texts and authors and integrated “students

giving their own narratives in their own ways.” These responses articulate that evolutions of literacy practices are attainable and desirable not *regardless* of sociocultural differences, but *because* of them (Sarigianides, 2019).

Responses expounding beliefs about inclusivity were largely aligned with teacher dispositions, positioning educators as facilitators of “inclusive environments” and “judgement-free zones” where students’ diverse perspectives and literacy practices are “recognized and valued” and “inclusive of a wider world.” TCs described inclusive classrooms as an extension of instructors who are committed to social justice in their “responsive personalities” and “advocating for students’ beliefs” as much as their instructional practices. TCs lauded demeanors that embrace adolescents’ multiplicities of meaning-making, asserting, “When students know they’re welcomed and loved in a classroom, they’re more inspired to do good things beyond it.”

TCs who tended to think of literacy as amenable to change appeared more attuned to sociocultural identities and differences among adolescents and seemed to be more apt to conceptualize what it means to teach in ways that move education toward social justice. Successful teaching is certainly possible with autonomous approaches; however, TCs articulating fixed ways of knowing showcased a deference toward normalized curricula that often fail to represent culturally and linguistically diverse student populations (Muhammad, 2020). Harkening back to Street’s (1984) paradigm, TCs who articulated a more conservative view of literacy and learning tended to offer more limited conceptions of enacting social justice pedagogy. And TCs whose definitions of literacy practices and texts reflected more expansive ideas were able to offer more concrete examples of social justice in practice (Sleeter, 2001).

Discussion

Twenty TCs engaged with our questionnaire by sharing perspectives on texts, literacy, and social justice education. Some respondents reinforced autonomous approaches to literacy and little to no articulation of a social justice pedagogy, let alone a vision for leveraging literacy as a tool for enacting social justice. Others cultivated critical consciousness through equity-based dispositions that valued differences, as well as ideological approaches to literacy, recognizing the range of ways that meaning is made and communicated. Navigating this complicated web of disparate views about literacy proved challenging, yet Street’s (1984) model afforded us breadth and depth to analyze the complexity of TCs’ responses, which reflected a wide range between the autonomous and ideological, often by the same TCs, and at times, within the same statement.

TCs’ statements coded as fixed suggested autonomous approaches to literacy. And while we don’t believe autonomous perspectives are necessarily antithetical to social justice pedagogy, we do believe that a view of literacy that is more limited than expansive can translate into teaching practices that are more limited in their ability to be culturally and linguistically sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017). Within the *Literacy as Fixed* section, TCs’ ideas about justice-oriented curricula and approaches were rather derivative, reminiscent of familiar talking points typical in methods classrooms (Bolick et al., 2019). Within the *Literacy as Amenable to Change* section, however, TCs shared more generative conceptions of what justice looks like in ELA classrooms, understandings that mirrored more robust, asset-leaning ideas about adolescents and literacy practices (Sarigianides, 2019). As one might expect, TCs’ developing pedagogies are nuanced and dynamic. For instance, TCs discussed various accommodations that can be offered to students to

modify learning environments and afford greater chances at success, which is clearly a student-centered perspective. However, the ways in which those accommodations were described revealed a constricted understanding of literacy teaching as information delivery from knowledge to ignorance. And yet, by engaging in the very act of brainstorming accommodations, TCs are reflecting upon their orientation to differences among adolescent learners, which illustrates that they are considering socially-just moves in the classroom.

Our research question helps us make sense of these somewhat knotty findings. The first component of the question inquired into the ways TCs' perceptions of literacy shape their understandings of social justice. As suggested in the findings, these TCs acknowledged the expanse of texts that students engage with outside schools and considered these diverse modes (e.g., social media, images, music, etc.) to be legitimate. However, they struggled to adopt ideological approaches to literacy instruction when imagining how they would select content and assess students in an ELA classroom. Thus, these TCs largely fell back on autonomous approaches grounded in consumption of alpha-numeric texts even after recognizing the powerful ways that students are producing new, multimodal texts in their own lives. Similarly, TCs recognized differences among students. They knew that as teachers they would be faced with diverse students with diverse needs and diverse backgrounds. However, their responses to these differences varied: some TCs heralded equality (albeit often incorrectly in the name of equity); others

embraced equity. Ultimately, the ways TCs oriented toward *difference* provides the greatest insight into the second component of our research question.

The second part of our question inquired into how TCs' perceptions of literacy shape their conceptions of social justice pedagogy. Across the study, TCs recognized differences. They saw different needs and experiences of their students, they saw different ways that students make meaning of the myriad texts surrounding them in and out of schools, and they saw the need to do something about systemic inequities

“They saw different needs and experiences of their students, they saw different ways that students make meaning of the myriad texts surrounding them in and out of schools, and they saw the need to do something about systemic inequities contributing to and grounded in difference.”

contributing to and grounded in difference. However, although these TCs recognized difference, and many of them even developed asset-oriented approaches to understanding difference, many struggled to envision how they could value and sustain these differences within the ELA classroom. As both researchers and teacher educators, we see parallels between how these TCs discussed literacy and their perceptions of social justice. More than just a struggle to move theory or ideology into practice, our findings suggest that TCs' developing conceptions of

literacy and social justice occurred along a shared continuum. These TCs, for the most part, were able to develop and communicate views of literacy as an ideological practice and social justice as aimed at preserving differences and dismantling systemic oppression. However, as they discussed and analyzed actual classroom practices, they largely maintained allegiance to autonomous, alpha-numeric understandings of literacy, mirrored by deficit approaches to difference and social (in)action.

We know that ELA teacher education needs to move beyond theoretical understandings of social justice and toward the practice of social justice pedagogies to prepare novice teachers to enact socially-just instructional interactions and experiences of disruption (Bolick et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that addressing perceptions of social justice and literacy in tandem could prove beneficial; however, incorporating student voices and facilitating reflective practices may not be enough. Even though they were able to articulate ideological conceptions of literacy and socially just pedagogies, some TCs tended to revert back to personal schooling experiences and limited views of equality when discussing how they might actionize their knowledge. This shortcoming in translating theory into practice suggests a need to continually reimagine what schooling can be, especially for culturally and linguistically diverse students who have been historically and presently marginalized in schools (Muhammad, 2020). Increased support for TCs as they critically reflect on relationships between literacy practices and social justice knowledge, providing models of ideological approaches to literacy instruction as embedded within social justice pedagogies in ELA, and critically interrogating these models to learn how difference is sustained could give TCs the tools they need to enact socially-just, ideological literacy practices in their own teaching.

Conclusion

Justice-driven teaching and teacher education is often rooted in reflexive practices, including responsiveness to feedback and empathetic stances defined by the act of listening. Analyzing our TCs' understandings of social justice and literacy afford a glimpse into their varying levels of readiness with regard to impacting adolescents in their ELA classrooms and communities. Our questionnaire

provided a conduit through which TCs could illustrate the degree to which their instructors are exposing them to connections among underlying societal issues, justice-oriented scholarship, and literacy practices, and helping them access live educative spaces where theories are actionized in the name of justice. As teacher educators, our commitment to students' voices can help us model reflexivity, to constantly revisit our pedagogies and practices to gauge their reflection and representation of those voices. And an ideological approach to literacy democratizes classrooms by including myriad texts, cultures, and linguistic traditions. As Christopher Emdin added in his memorable remarks: "The art of teaching is the art of remix; it's the art of reimagining" (as cited in NCTE, 2018, para. 4).

As many TCs demonstrated in their statements, we believe this art of reimagining can begin with questioning our fundamental ideas about literacy. How do we define literacy? Who is afforded the opportunity to define literacy, who is not? How is literacy catalyzed in classrooms? Whose literacy practices are valued? Whose are discounted? We also believe the act of reimagining requires us to be fluid and not static in our teaching, actively recognizing assets in new approaches and not falling into deficits. To reimagine our work in ELA, we look to inspiring scholars who are engaging in the act of remixing through social justice. We can reimagine our approaches to language by remixing our attitudes about language (Baker-Bell, 2020). We can reimagine our partnerships to focus on the priorities of people and communities rather than the needs of program and institutions (Allen & Kinloch, 2013). We can reimagine our curricula by remixing the histories and historical figures we celebrate (Carruthers, 2018). We call upon educators to let the voices of students provide the soundtrack to our ongoing act of remixing.

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