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## Pre-service Teachers as Curriculum Makers: What Could Social Justice Look Like in a Middle School Curriculum?

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# Pre-service Teachers as Curriculum Makers: What Could Social Justice Look Like in a Middle School Curriculum?

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Middle school is an important space for teachers working with youth to be cognizant of a student's social identities, especially when thinking about issues of social justice. The literature on culturally relevant curriculum provides evidence that to be culturally relevant, teachers must have critical knowledge of their students' backgrounds and incorporate this into the curriculum they teach (Aronson, 2016). Particularly, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) rejects deficit approaches that position students of color as deficient and in need of overcoming their "barriers." Building off the work of Gloria Ladson Billings and her conceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy, Paris and Alim (2014) argue that we must move beyond just the relevance of the communities we are serving and also sustain cultural backgrounds. Ultimately, CSP "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 88, *emphasis in original*). We come to this work with the explicit understanding that there is an interrelated relationship between curriculum and teachers, and thus

their pedagogy. As teacher educators, we must advocate for our pre-service teachers (PST) to become culturally relevant curriculum makers who incorporate a culturally sustaining pedagogy. For the purpose of this article, we are interested in curriculum making, especially as a part of teacher education coursework.

Nearly three decades ago, Clandinin and Connelly (1992) argued the teacher is a curriculum maker because "the teacher is an integral part of the curriculum constructed and enacted in the classrooms" (p. 363). Historically, curriculum was seen as a technical instrument for school reform, with teachers as the vessels who would give knowledge to students (Craig & Ross, 2008). However, building on the writings of John Dewey, curriculum scholars such as Joseph Schwab, Phillip Jackson, and Elliot Eisner argued there was an important link between teaching and curriculum that should not be ignored (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992): the teacher is a curriculum maker. It is important to note that while all of these scholarly works are essential to our understanding of teachers as curriculum makers in the literature, we also recognize the dominance of male, Eurocentric views in the field of curriculum studies.

Importantly, other teacher scholars' stories (often stemming from their own schooling experiences) such as those of Carter G. Woodson, Anna Julia Cooper, George I. Sanchez or Luther Standing Bear, are also instrumental to understanding the important role teachers play in curriculum making (Brown & Au, 2014).

Today, as a result of neoliberal policies on higher education and K-12 schooling more broadly, teachers are often positioned as *technicians*, much in the same way that Henry Giroux argued in 1988. As curriculum continues to become more and more scripted, there is less of a sense of agency for classroom teachers to feel they actually are curriculum makers (Aronson, 2018; Biesta, 2017; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). This leaves the impression that teachers possess little to no agency in their classrooms – a message critical educational scholars aim to disrupt in the literature (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Priestley, Edwards, Priestley & Miller, 2012). In fact, there are many examples of teachers who have successfully worked as curriculum makers in their school communities, particularly when it comes to teaching for social justice (Gutstein, 2006; Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011).

Are teachers truly powerless with no control over their curricular decisions or pedagogical choices? We argue NO! We understand schools and teaching at not neutral and are therefore already value-laden in a Eurocentric epistemology (Bernal, 2002). However, teachers have the ability to work against the “canon” and to produce a more culturally relevant curriculum (Aronson, 2016; Gay, 2013). Teachers must cultivate approaches that are more culturally relevant, especially considering that “many students of color are not performing as well as they could in any

school settings where teaching and learning are approached solely from the perspectives of Eurocentric values, assumptions, beliefs, and methodologies” (Gay, 2014, p. 354). With this understanding, we do not suggest it is the students who need to change to conform to schools, but rather the curriculum and pedagogy of the teachers that need to change, thus engaging in culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014). Oftentimes, to do such work, teachers must find ways to navigate high-stakes environments which do not necessarily support culturally relevant curriculum.

Culturally relevant curriculum is a pedagogical orientation we attempt to foster within our teacher education program. If we desire teachers be equipped as “curriculum makers” as Clandinin and Connelly (1992) advocated, the question then becomes, how? We believe the logical answer to such a question is to locate exposure to this pedagogical orientation within teacher education. Just as teachers learn about pedagogy in their preparation programs, they too can learn about curriculum making; for as we and others have argued, these ideas are interrelated. Within this line of inquiry, we ask three important questions:

1. What could social justice look like in the middle school curriculum?
2. How do we help young adolescents recognize and repudiate racism and other forms of social injustice?
3. What are some lessons learned from a middle level teacher preparation with a focus on social justice?

Based on the learning experiences of one teacher educator (Aronson) and the pre-service middle school teachers she taught

(Culberson, Hochstetler, Lowman, McCartney, McMinimy, Murphy, Newlin, Santen, Sutphin, Terlau, Vrzal, & Wheeler), we share the curricular work developed in a “Teacher Leadership for Social Justice” course during the Fall 2016 semester. The PST researched, conceptualized, and deliberated social justice curricular units developed for middle school students which aligned with the Common Core Standards (CCS) (2018) and other state standards. Aronson’s primary role was to provide theoretical underpinnings for curricular work through course readings and assignments (i.e. Brown, 2010; Eisner, 2001; Pinar, 2012) and give continuous feedback throughout the process. We first begin with a brief overview of the theoretical lens used when considering middle school adolescents/youth and the appropriateness of teaching for social justice (given this is the population the PST were formulating their lessons for). Then we move into a description of the institutional context, the participants (the PST), as well as the course overview. Next, we present snapshots of three groups’ process and rationale for the curriculum they designed (overviews of each project are included in the Appendices A, B, and C). We conclude with a synthesis of the students’ personal commentaries on their “teacher education” while giving advice to their teacher educators for how to support them in learning to develop curriculum for social justice.

### **Social Justice and Middle Level Adolescence**

Within our educative spaces (both P-12 and college) we often hear claims that children and adolescents are not ready for conversations related to social justice. However, there is evidence to support, that even with early childhood students,

children are capable of engaging with topics of racism, gender inequality and sexism (Laman, 2006; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2009). There are real repercussions for not addressing such topics, given students in middle school are in their early adolescence where they are already acknowledging their social identities including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religious/non-religious identities (Brown & Brown, 2011; Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Flynn, 2012).

Two dominating paradigms are often used to understand adolescence in education: the biological and sociohistorical (with the biological dominating educational discourses). The biological view is centered around characteristics, behaviors, and needs facing youth, typically between the ages of 12 and 18 (Lesko, 2012). This is often associated with a developmental framework such as Erik Erikson’s psychosocial identity model that helps in understanding “[the] important role of society and people surrounding adolescents recognizing, supporting and thus helping shape [an] adolescent’s identity” (Beyers & Cok, 2008, p.147). The second approach, a sociohistorical one, emphasizes how context, such as class and race shapes the construction of youth in distinct ways. However, this approach also leaves out the notion that adolescents are fundamentally different and “do not consider modern adolescence in relation to broad cultural transformations of time, race, gender, and citizenship” (Lesko, 2012, p. 19).

Ultimately, Lesko (2012) challenges us to ask “what are the systems of ideas that ‘make’ possible the adolescence that we see, think, feel and act upon?” (p. 8). This question requires us to take a shift from the youth themselves, and to focus on the

socially constructed discourses surrounding the youth. She argues, no matter race or other marginalizing identities, all youth are constructed through a white male (and heteronormative) lens. She challenges those of us who work with youth to examine and critique how we engage with our perceptions of youth alongside what we believe they are capable of knowing. For us, this begs the question, who is not ready for conversations related to social justice? The teachers (adults) or the students (children and adolescents)? Also, how does this become even more complicated when there is a predominately white, middle class, monolingual teaching force who might not be prepared to deal with issues around race, ethnicity, religious diversity, or sexuality in the classroom?

When it comes to engagement in the middle school curriculum, there is research that suggests middle school students can become disengaged from the content (Wang, Willett, & Eccles, 2011). While there are a number of factors which could influence this, of interest to us is how this disconnect from the curriculum could stem from its irrelevance to the lives of students, and/or their ability to connect and form relationships with the teachers in their schools (i.e. sustaining their own culture) (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Paris & Alim, 2014; Wolley & Bowen 2007). Davis (2006) contends that “supportive relationships with teachers may play an important developmental role during the transition to and through middle school” (p. 194). We contend that these sorts of connections are only possible when teachers begin to learn about who their students are so that they are able to validate their identities and create spaces for students to empower themselves.

For example, Flynn’s (2012) research investigated the culturally diverse classrooms of two white middle school teachers who aimed to create a critical dialogue space by taking up issues of race, culture, and privilege in the learning communities. The two teachers collaborated during the week to conduct lessons on race in their respective classrooms. Through field notes, class discussions, interviews with the teachers and students, and work samples, Flynn sought to understand how the middle school students (who were 60% White, 35% Black, and 5% Latinx or Asian) reacted to these conversations of race, culture, and White privilege. She found that the majority of students, especially the self-identified Black students, enjoyed the chance to talk about race. Students of color were more vocal about their racial experiences, which shed light on what their White peers could learn. Additionally, Flynn argued that even when the White students demonstrated resistance or guilt, they also posed questions which showed that they were thinking deeply about the lessons. Ultimately, she concluded that it was significant that a number of White students expressed their desire to take action due to the lessons.

With this critical understanding of adolescents and their ability to engage in critical conversations, we agree with Akos and Ellis (2008) who explain, “... it is important to consider racial and ethnic identity development of middle school students. For students of color, unlike their White counterparts, race and ethnicity are often central themes to identity and create differential challenges and opportunities” (p. 26). We also consider the ways identity awareness impacts youth who are marginalized by their sexuality, gender

identity, citizenship status, religious identities/non-identities, native language, and dis/abilities. In addition, for White students (and students with other dominant social identities, e.g. male, straight, and Christian), discussions of racial identity are also important because adhering to color-evasiveness can actually increase racial bias, and have negative impacts on their peers of color (Holoien & Shelton, 2012). The development of social-psychological awareness during middle school is one reason this is a crucial time to consider issues related to social justice as a part of the middle-school curriculum.

### **The Course: Teacher Leadership for Social Justice**

The undergraduate coursework described in this study took place at our mid-size public doctoral-degree granting university in the Midwest of the USA. The Fall 2016 cohort (two sections) of *Teacher Leadership for Social Justice* (EDL 318) was comprised of 28 students (27 female, one male; 25 White, one Biracial, one African American, and one Chinese International student). EDL 318 is a leadership and curriculum course required for all PST in the middle school teacher preparation program during their sophomore year. The course description reads:

This course is designed to challenge and shape each student's conceptions of school organization, school culture, professional development, teaching, curriculum, and school leadership for teachers committed to social justice. Students will read and interact

with current educational literature and research dealing with educational theory, social justice issues in schools, educational curriculum, reform, and the purpose of schooling. (EDL 318, Fall 2016 Syllabus)

The course operates with the assumptions that education is understood to be a social and political activity and that teachers within public schools will work for social justice within their teaching. We define social justice by relying on the work of Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017):

A critical social justice, "recognize[s] that society is stratified (i.e. divided and unequal) in significant and far reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this. (p. xviii)

This course is taken alongside a cohort of block-classes including *Early School Experience: Middle Childhood* (EDT 252M) and *Foundations of Literacy* (EDT 246). While these courses do not follow the "Association for Middle Level Education Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards" (AMLE)<sup>1</sup> formally, there are several aspects of the AMLE standards which are applicable across our courses (2012). For example, EDT 252M is a course directly related to preparing pre-service middle level educators with an understanding of middle childhood level

<sup>1</sup> The primary set of standards used in EDT 246M are the Ohio Standards for Teachers and the Ohio Learning Standards.

students, or adolescents. The AMLE Standard 1, Element B Knowledge of the Implications of Diversity on Young Adolescent states:

Middle level teacher candidates demonstrate their understanding of the implications of diversity on the development of young adolescents. They implement curriculum and instruction that is responsive to young adolescents' local, national, and international histories, language/dialects, and individual identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, culture, age, appearance, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, family composition). They participate successfully in middle level practices that consider and celebrate the diversity of all young adolescents.

This objective was a primary focus in each of our classes as we prepared students to create an interdisciplinary curriculum project across our three courses. All of the instructors of these courses worked as a collaborative teacher education team with the intention of students designing a curriculum project centered on social justice. EDT 252M required students create a hypothetical school that included a philosophical belief statement, organizational structure, team expectations, and programs which foster health, wellness, and safety. EDL 318 required students to think about the theoretical foundation of their curriculum. We required students include: 1) a clear, precise rationale for the structure and substance of the curriculum, including course aims and goals (based on the literature review completed earlier in the semester); 2) a general description of their curriculum unit overall; 3) a visual

conceptual map to display the integration of the curriculum; and 4) a description of what assessment might look like. EDT 246 required students create a text set which included an "anchor text" and various other forms of texts (e.g. movies, magazines, and podcasts) related to the topic (Batchelor, 2019). Finally, across all three courses, two lesson plan organizers were created for students to provide example lesson plans, or snapshots, within their curricular units. Even though each class assigned and was responsible for a particular part of the project, we graded these projects holistically as a team because they all informed and built upon one another.

Over the 15-week semester, there were three key themes which guided the course readings and assignments in EDL 318. In the first unit, "Self-reflection and Teacher Leadership," students were introduced to the guiding theoretical framework Aronson uses— Critical Race Theory (CRT). Students read about CRT as a theory in order to understand Aronson's pedagogical decisions and then did further readings on critical self-reflection, identity, language, whiteness studies, intersectionality, and community cultural wealth. The second unit, "Social Justice in Teacher Leadership," was led primarily by the PST who facilitated topics each class period. Topics included gender norms, the model minority, lesbian/bisexual/gay youth, trans youth, poverty/classism, and religion in the classroom. Community members also came in and taught about social work and children who are living in foster homes, and sexuality education. The final unit on "Curriculum and Policy in Teacher Leadership" focused on readings related to curriculum counter-narratives, critical educational policy, and the politics of teaching. All of the course readings,



assignments, and dialogue were intended to support the PST in their understandings of social justice with a goal to positively shape their pedagogy as future teachers and curriculum leaders.

Over the course of the semester, students worked in their interdisciplinary groups on these curriculum projects in order to dig deeper into social justice issues impacting schools. Since students represented an array of content area majors, they were grouped with the intention of integrating their subject area expertise across their interdisciplinary curriculum teams. They began by selecting possible topics of interest and conducted a thorough literature review to learn more about the research related to their chosen topic. From there, Aronson provided scaffolding to think about how their selected “issue” at hand might be addressed through curriculum and pedagogy. Students spent several weeks reviewing the research literature and created a rationale for *why* their curriculum idea was necessary in schools (the EDL 318 component). From there, they used these problem statements and constructed an overview of how they might conceptualize a curriculum unit. This analysis was intended to inform their final curriculum projects which they presented as “conference-style” sessions on our campus at the end of the semester.

### **The Curriculum Projects**

This group of PST created a social justice curriculum designed for middle school students. Within the blocked-classes (EDL 318, EDT 252 and EDT 246), each professor provided instructions for their course’s focus on the project which all came together as an interdisciplinary curriculum unit in the end. In this article we share the

work from EDL 318. For the EDL 318 portion, PST wrote a rationale situated in research which argued for their curriculum topic’s importance, an overarching description and timeline for the work (i.e. six weeks), and a brief account of their takeaways from this work. Their curriculum projects addressed our first two questions regarding what social justice might look like in a middle school curriculum (including the why) as well as considered how these curricula help young adolescents recognize and repudiate social injustice. See specific examples of their curriculum projects in the Appendices A, B, and C. In this section, we focus on the process and each group’s responses to this process, reported in their own style of reflective writing.

#### **Curriculum Group One: Reflections**

Sitting in the back of a middle school classroom for field observations, each member of our group has heard a student make a comment that fills our newly enlightened, pre-service teacher minds with anger and concern. “Get the Mexicans out,” “That’s retarded,” or “That’s so gay.” Our first reaction was shock, curious as to why they would think it is okay to say such things. But it only takes a moment for us to realize that students speak in such a way because of their limited understanding of the effects that their rhetoric can have on others. Middle school students are like sponges, absorbing the language they hear from their families, friends, and media. And sometimes, unbeknownst to them, what they regurgitate is harmful.

This made us question what our mindsets might look like now in college if we were taught the dispositions of social justice at a younger age, rather than in our early adulthood. For 20 years, our minds were shaped by the dominant hegemonic ideas of society. These were 20 years that

we had to relearn. The first conversations we had around privilege and oppression didn't begin until our sophomore year of our teacher education program at our university. These discussions left us feeling defensive about what we knew to be true for 20 years. How could we know so little? Part of this struggle was that these social justice ideas challenged us to question morals we had been taught around a *hard work ethic* or *colorblindness*. We thought this was something everyone believed and was normal! For example, Em initially struggled coming to terms with the privilege her white skin color gave her in society. Emily experienced similar feelings when it came to unearthing the advantages her socio-economic status provided her, including her educational opportunities and access to healthcare. These conversations left us feeling victimized and misunderstood, defensive of the equal opportunity we believed everyone was given. Key to working through this defensiveness was a reading Aronson provided to us in class the first day: "Willing to be Disturbed" by Margaret Wheatley. Aronson consistently reminded us to monitor our emotional reactions to what we were learning, and to come to her when we needed to talk. While she wouldn't necessarily, "coddle us" to make us feel better for the sake of feeling better, she would share her own processing through her privilege and that at least helped create a common understanding between us. We felt we could trust her and ask questions without being shamed.

As we were working through this defensive phase, we initially felt shame for our privilege. Illumination came when we realized we were not in the wrong for who we are, or where we came from, but our privilege was simply the result of a larger,

systemic inequality and acknowledging this was the first step toward not being complicit. We now recognize that life is not an even playing field. Our professors succeeded in exposing us to the reality of our positions and this will allow us to contribute what was learned that semester to apply in our future classrooms. What would our nation look like if we had a generation of young adults who were empathetic to people across cultural divides? We believe a first step is research-supported social justice curriculum taught in the middle grades.

Upon completion of this course, we understood that the development of critical awareness is imperative in creating critically conscious individuals. We wanted our curriculum to reflect these ideals that we learned ourselves, specifically through critical reflection on positionality (see Figure 1). Entering middle school brings a newness of self-identity as students begin the transition from their families' complete influence. This malleable age creates an important environment for discovering one's positionality, intersecting identities, and how youth are situated in society.

Several of us completed our student teaching (in 2019) and have started our first-teaching jobs. Social justice guides our pedagogy and we are still finding ways to incorporate social justice into our curriculum, such as our project which focused on exploring positionality while in middle school. We hope curriculum similar to ours will be considered, personalized to fit students' needs, and implemented in classrooms. With time and care dedicated to this work, the applications for thinking about positionality while in middle school has the potential to encourage change for a more equitable world. Through the experience of researching and writing

curriculum, we are better equipped to bring these key conversations into our classrooms, and we hope other PST will have greater access to similar educational experiences. As Ash shares:

*I've come to find that, through the teaching experiences I have had thus far, that integrating social justice in curriculum does not have to be this complete overhaul of curriculum, not right away at least. I have been gradually implementing social justice themes (systemic racism, police brutality, socioeconomic issues, etc) into my lessons in order to give students a look into these issues while*

*still complying with state standards ... My process has become an effort to marry the curriculum I WANT to implement, with the curriculum I HAVE to implement. This could very well be considered a sneaky way of doing things, but it gets students thinking about the issues and wanting to take action. This creates a critical lens that they would not have if I had just used the curriculum guide given to me. Given the fact that having a critical lens is something that schools do not often think about, I want to make sure that, as much as I can, my students are able to acquire that for their own learning and for their lives.*

**Figure 1**

### **Curriculum Project One**

<b>Unearthing Positionality to Create Critically Aware Students</b> <b>Emily Culberson, Ash McCartney, Emily Santen, Rachel Sutphin, and Suzanne Lowman</b>
<p><i>Curriculum Description</i></p> <p>The goal of our curriculum is to promote understanding of students' positionalities and intersectionalities and how these personal factors affect and enhance learning. There are a plethora of guiding questions regarding the curriculum, most of which would be asked directly to students. Examples of these include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is positionality?</li> <li>• What is intersectionality?</li> <li>• What are your personal positions?</li> <li>• How do these positions affect your identity?</li> <li>• How can we discover our own positionalities and intersections?</li> <li>• How can these concepts be seen in the community?</li> <li>• How can we use our positions to work towards a more equitable society?</li> <li>• What are some of the effects that intersectionality can have on yourself and those you interact with?</li> </ul> <p>We will begin with assisting students with learning pertinent definitions, such as positionality, intersectionality, and oppression. The students will learn these definitions (see below), and while we will not ask them to specifically connect them to themselves, we are operating on the assumption that students will do this on their own. We do not want to start off with making personal connections right away because we have found that often this can often bring out defensiveness and shut student's down. We don't want to immediately discuss heavy concepts which will limit transparent discussion. They will also gain a sense of what lens they may begin to critically view the world through. This is the unit where we will read <i>Nine, Ten</i> (see Appendix) and use the story and characters to give dimension and a personal side to the definitions.</p>

After giving students the basic necessities, they will begin to evaluate the connection that may or may not exist within the nation. This will include our current event unit, and give students the opportunity to look at the country through a different lens than what they are accustomed to. Rather than just repeating what they hear on the news or what their caregivers say, we want students to begin to form their own thoughts.

The last unit will bring these issues closer to home and make connections to the state that we are teaching in, as well as the community that the school and students reside in. One way that we will do this is by inviting community members to come into the classroom to talk about how their positionality and intersectionality has affected them. Tying together the first three units, we will introduce our first multi-genre project that will be focused on examining systematic oppression in the United States.

Because this curriculum is based on the identity and experiences of students, we want the means of assessment to reflect this. Our goal is not for the assessment to tell students whether or not they are right or wrong, but rather to provide a means for them to dive into the material and any meaning they may develop on their own. Our purpose is to see how students participate and engage with the topic in order to see growth. Our assessments will be through multimedia projects during the semester, meaning they will be done through multiple means, such as videos, journals, social media, or wherever the student's creativity leads them. By doing this, every learner will have an equitable chance to represent themselves from their own positionality. The final project will have the students focus on their own positionality after we dive in as a class, and time will be given over the semester to discover and reflect on the positions they hold. The purpose of these projects is to expose the injustice of societal norms and create an awareness in students of who they are and their capacity for change.

### **Curriculum Group Two: Reflections**

Prior to the course many of us had never given much thought to our positions of privilege. In EDL 318, however, we were forced to monitor our willingness to be disturbed (Wheatley, 2002) and confront challenging issues like the school to prison pipeline (STPP) and the role that we as future educators will have in either unknowingly reinforcing or breaking such cycles of marginalization. Many of us had never understood the scope of our own privilege, in terms of race, class, citizenship, etc. and how that influenced our educational experiences growing up. Our education classes taught us that our future classrooms would be diverse in terms of race, gender, class, religion and such. However, most of us hadn't considered the types of challenges that we might face as we learned to meet the needs of our racially diverse classrooms. Part of what we realized we needed to learn was how to teach in a way that created spaces that empowered students, and not further marginalized them.

In studying inequity in our EDL 318 class, when we learned about the STPP we were disturbed by the disproportionate impact on students of color and/or those with disabilities. Understanding how the STPP mostly impacted such marginalized students, we sought to create a curriculum geared toward dismantling this (see Appendix B). We quickly learned most literature cited about the STPP was for educator knowledge, and not for middle school students. Fueled by our own angst learning about the STPP, and how blatantly the hegemonic structure of most schools perpetuated this, we decided to develop a school curriculum that could challenge rigid school structures preventing relationship building. We learned through our research that teachers play a powerful role in student discipline decisions so we wanted to focus our attention on preventative measures. We chose to focus on creating a sense of community within our schools that extended beyond the classroom. This idea sprung from two places. First, all of us had noted from our educational experiences the

powerful impact a strong, supportive community could have on a school and its students. Four out of the five of us had experienced strong communities that supported our educational journeys, while the fifth member felt that they had lacked such support and provided her insight. In addition to learning from our own schooling experiences growing up, we were in a field placement once a week with our cohorts to learn from the middle school students we were placed with. Building from the theoretical knowledge we learned in class and applying the practical knowledge we learned from field, we conceptualized what learning in a community could look like with the help of our students. We believed such rich experiences should also be something for middle school students engage in with their teachers.

To work towards combating the STPP, we created a curriculum comprised of more than just the lesson plans and standards, but also thought about curriculum more broadly. This included the curriculum as a part of the school building structure and schedule, partnerships with the community, and the relationships between peers (the middle schoolers). In order to foster a sense of community within the school, we decided students would be placed into a “family” consisting of three students from each grade level. Within our school, we’d work together on building trust and support with one another. For example, we would create daily meditation practices as a way to connect and bond with each other. “Families” would also choose a community partner of their choice to collaborate with on projects. Together, with community partners, “families” would develop a service project that would be mutually beneficial. We believe these types of connections are an important predecessor in helping

adolescents repudiate social injustice by expanding learning to be more than what is happening in the school building and the academic curriculum.

Although we all felt a great sense of accomplishment in imagining this type of curriculum, we are struck by how much work is left to be done. We understand that our curriculum isn’t enough to eradicate the STPP. What our curriculum does provide, however, is a potential framework within which the STPP might be combated by fostering community and well-being in schools. While our curriculum targets some of the key issues, to truly dismantle the role teachers play in the STPP, a paradigm shift will be necessary in teacher education programs to better prepare teachers. We need to re-think about the structure of our schools and advocate for socially just policies, re-think what we teach, and re-think how we educate teachers. As we reflect on our experiences throughout teacher education, we now see how social justice was confined to one semester, and largely to this one specific class. We argue it is necessary that these issues be tackled and touched upon in every class, and every semester of our program! Our methods courses touched on how to accommodate English Language Learners but made no mention of how to make our content culturally relevant and responsive. It’s important to note from our own experiences, that we spent one semester talking about how to tackle the STPP and other issues – many of which are featured in this paper – but in comparison to taking the EDL 318 class, our other classes often pushed aside social justice topics to cover things such as methods, classroom management, and meeting state standards/testing. Now that we are finding ourselves in our first teaching positions, we

continue to push ourselves in our learning. We challenge the readers of this article to ask: How do we educate future teachers with all the skills and knowledge they need without forgetting our students who have

been historically marginalized? We have learned throughout our own teacher education that we need to prioritize meeting our students' needs first.

## Figure 2

### **Curriculum Project Two**

<p><b>The American School System: A Child's Safe Haven or Gateway to Prison?</b>          Jocelyn McMinimy, Emily Murphy, Ralph Newlin, Nicholas Vrzal, and Imani Wheeler  <i>Curriculum Description</i></p>
<p>To work on combatting the STPP, our school curriculum is comprised of more than just our academic standards, but actually a curriculum of schooling programming. This curriculum is intending to take place over one academic year. In order to foster a sense of community within the school, students will be placed into a "family" consisting of three students from each grade level. Ideally families would meet during lunch and one scheduled day per week. Families will together choose a community partner of their choice to partner with. Together, with community partners, "families" will develop a service project. The goal of here is for students to learn more about their community and for the community to benefit from the work being done so that both parties benefit.</p> <p>Each quarter students within the family program will have different goals and tasks. The first quarter will encourage students to critically reflect on who they are and how their intersecting identities are constructed and then in turn get to know their fellow students. The goal of this is for students to gain an appreciation for their own culture and background as well as those of their peers and to foster greater understanding between grade levels and consequently throughout the whole school. Time will also be spent to talk about conflict resolution, effective communication. The aim is to equip families to manage disagreements within their team and across the school effectively. This first quarter is key in establishing a positive family culture which will hopefully seep out to create a positive school culture.</p> <p>In the second quarter students will be asked to engage with their communities, conducting research on social and political challenges in their community. Students will be pointed towards investigating structural inequalities and disparities in political and economic power and will be encouraged to use a critical lens. Students are challenged to think about what they as middle schoolers can do to address the problems they uncover. By the second half of this quarter students must have chosen and made contact with their community partner.</p> <p>The third quarter is the action quarter where students carry out their service projects and spend time in their community. Special time will be devoted to reflecting on their experiences working in their family and in their community. These journals will include what they are learning about their community and how they feel about the work they are doing, specifically whether or not they feel like they are being able to have a positive impact on their community.</p> <p>Finally, the fourth quarter is devoted to finishing up their projects, or deciding how they are going to continue their partnership beyond this school year. Students will be asked to write a larger reflection on the experience as a whole and present their projects to the rest of the school so that all the families can benefit from each other's learning and so that the impact of the entire school's work can be seen and felt. One of the main keys to success of this process is the active participation of teachers and other staff across the school to model behaviors and skills such as, effective communication and conflict resolution, the use of a critical lens.</p>

### **Curriculum Group Three: Reflections**

As we studied issues of gender norms and queer youth in EDL 318, we were concerned that this *taboo* topic would impact us as future teachers. Before taking this course, we never thought about how heteronormativity permeates schools. While in our middle school field placements, we were able to observe social and educational directives that policed gender norms. We saw ‘girls’ instructed to avoid conflict and to prioritize others’ feelings above their own, and we saw ‘boys’ received messages that they should be masculine, strong, and play sports. In addition to learning about and witnessing how gender was performed, we also observed middle school students who identified as LGBTQ and didn’t fit into a gender binary. What was of great concern to us is that these middle schoolers were not represented in the school curriculum. Similar to our own educational experiences, teachers often let the stigmas of the LGBTQ community dictate their classroom, which only further reinforces heteronormativity. Throughout our time in EDL 318, and in our field placements, we grew more passionate about creating a space for voices that were constantly being silenced. In order to create conditions for students to empower themselves, teachers must design curriculum that is inclusive, which includes providing all students awareness of the LGBTQ community. All teachers have students in their classrooms who identify as LGBTQ, have family members who identify as LGBTQ, or simply non-LGBTQ students who need to be educated about sexuality differences.

We argue that the incorporation of LGBTQ literature is one way to create such an inclusive curriculum. The LGBTQ community is almost nonexistent in school

literature in our state. This lack of representation can cause LGBTQ students to feel isolated, unsure of themselves and their identity, and unwelcome in their school community. Schools are more likely to have academically successful students when the classroom settings include curriculum that are reflective of all students (Beane, 2005). Given the state we teach in does not actively support this type of inclusive curriculum, we had to ensure that we were able to *defend* a curriculum that aligned with standards (see Appendix C). Each activity in our curriculum is linked to specific CCS (2018) as a way for us to be equipped to explain why we are including the texts that we choose. We believe we must first begin with recognizing social injustice before we can think about changing it. For our curriculum project (see Appendix C), the adolescent literature we selected exposes students to LGBTQ people and topics. Our beginning lessons would include a recognition of biases that all humans hold and educate students about the different types of diversity represented in schools, in our case, gender identity and sexual orientation. We believe that by delaying this type of inclusive curriculum as early as middle school middle school (and really elementary school), school will continue to oppress students who identify themselves within the LGBTQ community or perhaps have family members identifying as LGBTQ.

Despite our research and ability to support the appropriateness of an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum for middle schoolers, there are still challenges that we know as future teachers we will face. While our topic could be considered a *risky* topic for middle schoolers, we are prepared to defend our actions with evidence-based research and are now more knowledgeable

to use arguments based in inclusion with administrators and caregivers. At our university, our peers and other professors were intrigued with the creativity of our curriculum and passion for creating an equitable learning environment. We believe that it is our responsibility as educators to make the classroom an equitable learning environment for all students in which they can critically challenge social norms and combat intolerance.

Trusting educators to think critically about heteronormativity, create and use an inclusive curriculum, and to provide multiple narratives in order to provoke critical thinking are just a few of the first

steps toward equity in the classroom. In working through this process, we are more confident in our ability to create an inclusive curriculum and discuss the ways heteronormativity and gender norms negatively impact the field of education. It is our hope that other PST and new teachers such as ourselves critically challenge this idea of heteronormativity and become passionate about providing an equitable education for LGBTQ students. One way we can start to combat the way heteronormativity operates in schools can be with teachers. Chances are that change will not happen from the top down, so we must be the change from the bottom up.

### Figure 3

#### **Curriculum Project Three**

<p><b>Leveling the Playing Field: Establishing an Equitable Classroom Community for LGBTQ Students</b>  <b>Brittany Kern-Hochstetler and Megan Terlau</b></p>
<p><i>Curriculum Description</i></p> <p>With guidance from the queer theory and critical pedagogy (Zacko &amp; Smith, 2010), our curriculum will begin to dismantle systems of oppression to create an equitable learning environment for middle school students. Our ideal curriculum would last nine weeks during an advisory/elective period to unpack lessons we have planned about the LGBTQ community. There are weekly themes to guide the lessons such as Sexual Identities, Awareness &amp; Oppression, LGBTQ Health, and more (see Appendix). The goal of this curriculum is break down the heteronormative culture that creates a heterosexual dominant culture in the classroom.</p> <p>As the course material is navigated, we as educators will use critical questions that help disrupt current societal norms (Zacko &amp; Smith, 2010). These questions will include broad and overarching questions that will guide the course like, 'what does oppression look like?', 'What are the assumptions/ biases associated with the LGBTQ community and history?', 'How does gender differ from sexuality?', 'who decides what norms society must conform to?', 'what stereotypes hinder equity in schools?', and 'How do national youth organizations (i.e.: Boys &amp; Girls Clubs of America) exclude the LGBTQ community?' Furthermore, it is our goal to challenge students to begin contemplating their own role in contributing or rejecting these systems of oppression. These questions will involve, 'what biases do we unknowingly submit to?', 'what oppression can we observe in our everyday lives?', 'how do we contribute through our actions and words to this oppression? (i.e. that's gay)', and 'how must we change ourselves before we can begin to dismantle the biases of society?'</p>



**Aronson: Reflections**

As the instructor of these PST, I had the privilege of watching them move not only through my class, but through their teacher education program. Not all of the PST came to EDL 318 with defensiveness while studying power, privilege, and oppression, but the ones who did, benefited from reading “Willing to be Disturbed” (Wheatley, 2002) at the beginning of the semester and grew cognizant of their own white fragility (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Many courses which address issues around “diversity” often discuss ideas such as culture and differentiated instruction at a surface level. That was not how EDL 318 was designed and I believe it was reflected in the students’ projects.

Group One probably shared the most about their own discomfort in learning about racial privilege. As we were learning about positionality in EDL 318 and working to understand the ways one can be both privileged and marginalized at the same time, they grew curious as to why they had never learned about these ideas sooner. This prompted their decision to create a curriculum that introduced similar concepts that was age-appropriate for middle schoolers. Group Two seemed to have less of a struggle accepting understandings of white supremacy and anti-Blackness in society. They hit the ground running studying societal issues around discipline and prisons in the United States. They took a broad approach in their project trying to understand what it meant to educate holistically and how this might prevent discipline issues from happening in the first place. Group Three came back from their field experience having witnessed the exclusion of LGBT students. Again, they did not start out defensive about this topic at all. Rather, they felt a calling to do this

project on behalf of the students they were serving.

Each set of PST had different experiences processing the lessons learned in EDL 318. Some had to do more work on their own discomfort, while others were thirsty for knowledge from the beginning. As their instructor, I was very impressed at the initiative this particular group of students took over the semester— I do not have this experience every time that I teach. Their commitment to this work is also evident in wanting to collaborate on this article so that we can advocate for courses such as EDL 318 to be a part of teacher education programs. Since this Fall 2016 semester, I have carried on teaching new semesters of future teachers in another class I now coordinate— *Sociocultural Studies in Education* (EDL 204). I continue to learn from the students who come and go each semester, and while sometimes I get discouraged by some of my research findings that demonstrate how deeply embedded whiteness is, I try to stay focused on groups of students such as this group (and other students I have had over the years) who I know are committed to being social justice educators and continuously doing self-work to improve their practices. I keep in touch with this group of former students who are now busily working in their first years teaching and I have aspirations of following up on this work with them in the future.

**Implications: Advice for Teacher Educators**

In returning to the first two guiding questions in this paper, we sought to answer: *What could social justice look like in the middle school curriculum? And how do we help young adolescents recognize and repudiate racism and social injustice?*

Given the task to think about these larger guiding questions, these PST worked to create curricular units which addressed inequities in schools and were developmentally-appropriate with rationales rooted in evidence-based research. We follow Nancy Lesko's (2012) work which challenges us to question the socially constructed discourses around youth, particularly those which suggest they are incapable of having conversations around issues of race, class, gender identity, or sexual orientation. If we wish for teachers to become curriculum-makers who are socially-justice minded, then we must provide space for this within teacher education across all courses as members of Group Two suggested.

Conklin and Hughes (2016) argue for a "compassionate, critical, justice-oriented teacher education" (p. 47) that is rooted in compassion, feminist epistemologies, and modeling as a part of pedagogy. They explain,

Drawing on these perspectives, Conklin (2008) argued that teacher educators can address social justice issues with pre-service teachers by developing relationships with and among them (hooks, 2003), honoring and showing compassion for their lived experiences and existing attitudes (Hanh, 1987), and helping them practice openness to multiple perspectives of viewing the world to work toward greater justice (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). (p. 48)

In agreement with Conklin and Hughes (2016), Aronson sought to embody a "compassionate, critical, justice-oriented teacher education" in her class. This is a part of her own feminist epistemology that centers students and their experiences as

part of class dialogue, as well as her own vulnerability in sharing her positionality and journey to teach for social justice (Aronson, 2018). In turn, Aronson developed relationships with students which were reciprocal in learning, as Aronson realized the potential for curriculum-making in teacher education. Therefore, we conclude this article addressing our last question: *What are some lessons learned from a middle level teacher preparation program with a focus on social justice?* We have three implications which have stemmed from our work together as teacher and students: 1) We advocate for teacher educators to collaborate more intentionally with one another; 2) We advocate for teacher educators to continue to conduct self-work and build their own social justice knowledge base; and 3) We challenge teacher educators not to be afraid to discuss challenging issues that might be uncomfortable to students.

In considering our experiences, the first piece of advice we give to other teacher educators regards collaboration, not just among PST, but with other teacher educators. This might be seen through co-teaching in the college classroom or even conducting research with one another about their teaching. As with many educational models, the teacher is often held as the bearer of all knowledge, and the students are the vessels into which said knowledge is dispensed. However, oftentimes in our teacher education classrooms we preach such ideals, yet rarely practice them. Of course, the teacher educator holds a particular body of knowledge that he/she/ze inevitably teaches students, however, providing students the space to educate themselves, or even the teacher educator on particular issues, is powerful in that PST will continue

to hone these skills as they are learning to become practicing teachers. Teacher educators should be modeling these sorts of collaborations with their PST. We believe this practice of vulnerability is an important piece in teacher educators collaborating with both PST and other teacher educators.

Connected to our first implication, these PST scholars want their teacher educators to do this hard work themselves! This might include professional development opportunities such as creating a book club around a social justice issue. For example, at our institution, several teacher educators (and other faculty in the college) created a “Critical Whiteness” book club to better understand issues of white supremacy and whiteness and how this impacts our teaching. When discussing issues of social justice, not all teacher educators feel competent to address race, class, sexuality or religion. After all, most teacher educators resemble the teaching force at large, which remains predominantly white, monolingual, and middle class (Picower & Kohli, 2017). Therefore, if they have not had a social justice oriented teacher education themselves, how can we expect them to teach their PST about social justice?

Related to “who” is instructing teacher education courses is “what” they are teaching. It is common within teacher education to learn about pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in the subject areas (Shulman, 1987). This requires teachers to consider both the what (or the content) and the how (or the pedagogy) to teach effectively. However, when thinking about how we prepare teachers to be socially just, we also have to consider the development of their knowledge-base around equity and social justice. Dyches and Boyd (2017) offer an expanded version of

PCK— the Social Justice Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (SJPACK). SJPACK is “a theoretical framework predicated on the assumption that because all institutional maneuvers are politically charged and therefore never neutral, the foundational knowledge domain *Social Justice Knowledge* permeate and shapes all PCK practices ...” (p. 2). The acquisition of social justice knowledge was a primary objective within EDL 318. As Aronson continues to learn, she shares her learning and experiences with her students. This is a part of the process of doing self-work while continuing to educate oneself. We are never done learning.

Lastly, we reflect upon our challenge for teacher educators to hold space for difficult conversations in the classroom. Teacher educators should work hard to not just learn about social justice issues, but also how to have conversations related to these issues in the classroom. Aronson has experienced fear around talking with students about social justice issues like racism, heterosexism, and religious oppression. It is not just uncomfortable for students alone, oftentimes instructors can be uncomfortable too. However, this has not stopped her from continuing to work on the most effective ways to facilitate such conversations in the classroom. She has learned that you cannot be afraid to talk about these issues just because it might be uncomfortable or you might say the wrong thing. Every classroom context is different, so there is no right formula for facilitating such conversations, but beginning the semester with the “Willing to be Disturbed” (Wheatley, 2002) piece and reminding students you are there to support them throughout their learning, and to learn from students, is an important first step. As one PST shared,

*The importance of a student becoming critically aware before they go to college is even more imperative as the world becomes an increasingly difficult and political place to navigate through. If students are not exposed to positionality, intersectionality, and finding where they fit in the world before post-secondary school, as I was, then there is no guarantee they will learn about these topics and figure out where their puzzle piece belongs at all.*

We cannot risk that PST are ignorant about important social justice topics pertaining to race, class, gender and sexuality, and therefore teacher educators must take this educational charge and curricular orientation seriously in teacher education programs.

## Conclusion

The middle school classroom provides a particularly important space for addressing issues of social justice in the context of the development of adolescents' social identities (Brown & Knowles, 2007). As teacher educators (who are often simultaneously researchers), we write calls to action and make grandiose claims about the need for social justice approaches. However, we are not in the middle school classrooms each day interacting with middle school students. In seeking to create a social justice curriculum, teachers must supplement the "canon," which is far easier said than done (Aronson, 2018). Cochran-Smith (2004) describes the struggle:

Unlike researchers who remain outside the schools, teachers who are committed to working against the grain inside their schools are not at liberty to publicly announce brilliant but

excoriating critiques of their colleagues and the bureaucracies in which they work. Their ultimate commitment is to the school lives and the futures of the children with whom they live and work. (p. 28)

As teacher educators, we can aid future teachers in their commitment to middle school students by allowing space for them to practice creating curricula in teacher education which encourage them to "go against the grain." Specifically, we can guide them in becoming scholars by teaching them to find and use research which supports the need for such curricula, even if such curricula might be considered inappropriate by those not invested in social justice, or strictly Eurocentric in nature. As teacher educators, we can help PST find ways to make connections to the required state-mandated standards to fulfill their everyday "duties," while simultaneously encouraging a commitment to social justice that is authentic.

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## Appendix A

### Curriculum Project One

#### Unearthing Positionality to Create Critically Aware Students

Emily Culberson, Ash McCartney, Emily Santen, Rachel Sutphin, Suzanne Lowman

##### *Rationale for Unit*

Studies have shown that allowing students to explore their positionalities and how they fit in the global context of our world makes students more culturally empathetic, use more distinct rhetoric, and allows marginalized students a much needed voice (Bécares & Priest, 2015; Camicia & Zhu, 2012). Curriculum in our modern day society often focuses very distinctly on the history of the privileged, cutting out the stories of marginalized groups. These are groups that students relate to and stories they desperately need to hear. At this developmental stage in a middle schooler's life, it is easy for them to be selfish in nature. While often this age gets criticized for this common characteristic, we believe that this creates an ideal scenario to think and talk and ultimately learn about who they are and what that means. We want to teach our students how to coexist, care for one another, and engage in their communities, but first they must know who they are.

When helping middle school students discover and acknowledge their positionalities, we expect them to realize that they possess intersectional social identities that affect their lives. Whether it be race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, sexuality, ability, etc., these identities are imperative in their existence as citizens of the world. We believe that the inclusion of current events in the classroom will assist students in becoming knowledgeable about relevant topics and issues. Regardless of whether or not they will be affected, in order to actively participate in a democratic society they will be required to be knowledgeable and ideally empathetic.

Once students have become more critically aware of the world, they need to be aware of how to reflect both personally and in group settings. Reflection is a curriculum component that our team strongly believes is critical. Taking time to oneself is necessary for development, and journaling is one option we see as beneficial for students as they grow into their understanding of positionality and intersectionality. While it may be true that most reflection happens within the self, group reflection is also important in broadening the student's perspectives.

#### **Curriculum Project One - Sample Lesson Plan: *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story Character Dive***

##### Student Performance Objectives:

1. Consider various positionalities illustrated through the diverse characters in *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story*
2. Consider systems of oppression and privilege that play a role in our society and the lives of the characters in *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story*
3. Reflect on how students feel about these systems in their lives or our society in general

##### Literacy Component:

*Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story* Book by Nora Raleigh Baskin

The young adult novel *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story* does a fantastic job of focusing on students with very different identities and backgrounds, humanizing them, and in addition, showing their interconnectivity despite their differences. We believe that this book would be a great way to show how groups who are often "othered," like Blacks and Muslims, are really not as different as our students may seem and allow for students who relate to these identities to have a voice. We believe this would build empathy for these groups of people and allow students to better form their positionality as well as they uncover aspects of oppression these groups face that they may have never thought about before. Also, this book was written in

2016 showing its cultural relevance as the experiences of the kids in the book are experiences that students today are currently struggling with.

Key Academic Language:

*Positionality:* The recognition that where you stand in relation to others in society shapes what you can see and understand.

*Oppression:* Unfair treatment or control of a person or group of people, compare to definition of privilege

*Privilege:* Having a leg up as a person in a society, often because of one's skin color, gender, class, religion, etc., opposite of oppression

*Systematic vs. personal:* An overarching societal process and ideals vs. specific experiences and beliefs of individuals

*Character development:* The process of creating a believable character in fiction by giving the character depth and personality

*Static character vs. dynamic character:* static characters do not change throughout the story, while dynamic characters change

*Flat character vs. round character:* Flat characters are very simple and do not change, while round characters are complex and undergo development

Procedures:

Prior to introducing our text, *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story*, we want to present our students with a brief history of 9/11 and its significance on our country. Next, we will ask students to begin reading the novel while filling out character webs that map out the features of each character in the story, helping them keep track of the plethora of characters in the story while also preparing them for their after-reading activity.

After they've finished the novel, we intend to break our students up into small groups and have them create a "Fakebook" profile for an assigned character in *Nine, Ten* after comparing their character webs and brainstorming further their characteristics and beliefs. After they complete the profile, we will then ask the groups to "comment" on other group's profiles assuming the persona of their own group's character. Next, we will ask each group to come up and present their "Fakebook" accounts, encouraging the other groups that commented on the profile to explain why they commented what they did.

Finally, we want to wrap up this activity by talking about the struggles in these character's lives that may have affected their point of view, how that relates to their understanding of systematic oppression, and why it may affect one character differently than another depending on their privilege and oppression. At the end of this activity, we will then guide our students to reflect on our classroom discussion in their journals with some guided questions to help spark further considerations on the topics.

Connection to the Standards:

Our curriculum project fulfills our state-mandated English Language Arts standards.

- Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text
- Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).
- Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history (Ohio Dept. of Education, 2017).

In connection to our objective of developing positionality and critical awareness, point of view is directly related to middle school students ability to recognize themselves and others.

## Appendix B

### Curriculum Project Two

#### **The American School System: A Child's Safe Haven or Gateway to Prison?**

Jocelyn McMinimy, Emily Murphy, Ralph Newlin, Nicholas Vrzal, and Imani Wheeler

##### *Rationale for Unit*

The school to prison pipeline (STPP) is a disturbing national trend in which school-aged children are funneled out of our public school system, where they belong, and into the juvenile and criminal justice system. Students who we see most affected by this are youth of color or those with a history of abuse, poverty, neglect or learning disabilities. The pipeline begins with disciplinary action being taken against students who are perceived as "disobedient." With rising suspensions in part due to zero tolerance policies, more students are being sent back home even though this is often the origin of their behavioral problems. When we send students away for small offences it is not surprising that they should become bitter and hardened. It is even less surprising that students sent away fall behind and often feel stigmatized. Students who have been suspended once are much more likely to act out again or even eventually drop out. Those who do drop out are at a much higher risk of eventually ending up in prison, as 60% of all men in prison have no high school diploma (Amurao, 2013). To begin to tackle this we need to acknowledge that there is a problem with how we are currently disciplining students. We then need to evaluate and grasp the damage that has been done and we need school based restorative justice programs to restore any trust and goodwill in the relationships between schools, students and their communities (Cole & Vasquez Heilig, 2011).

While few schools are completely ignoring this issue, most aren't doing enough right now. The measures they have adopted have been unable to ease the disproportionate number of historically marginalized students receiving suspensions and ultimately landing in the school to prison to pipeline. Faced with this reality, we as educators can't just throw up our hands and say "we've done our best." No. We need to take a step back and look at what we *aren't* doing, and who we *aren't* paying attention to in our curriculum and instruction. We need to look beyond much touted positive behavior supports and interventions and examine ourselves as teachers and determine whether we are doing enough to be culturally responsive. Is our curriculum engaging and culturally relevant, or does it leave out whole swathes of our student body? Do we provide our students with understandings of "power" so that they understand how systemic inequality continues to exist? Do our curricular choices reflect our students' interests and needs? We need to provide a curriculum that encourages engagement and avoids the need for punitive actions when students don't relate.

#### **Sample Lesson Plan: Power and Influence in Your Community**

##### Student Performance Objectives:

- Understand how statistics can provide insight into the dynamics of their community (particularly the power structure of their community)
- Find statistics in about their community
- Look beyond the statistics, and know that these cannot tell the full story
- Think critically about what information we can gain (or omit) from statistics

##### Key Academic Language:

Quantitative Measures (Correlation, Causation), Power (Political and Social Power), Variables, Institutions

##### Procedures:

In Social Studies class, we will begin by having students think about what institutions hold power and influence in their communities using the context of the Reformation period. Students will brainstorm in their groups and make a web illustrating the different institutions (church, government, big companies etc.) and what

kind of power they hold. Groups will then present findings to the rest of the class. In their Math classes students will learn about data using correlations and causation. They will be asked to gather data on a community they belong to. They can decide what they want to consider their local community - their county or town for example. They will be asked to collect data from their families and communities on where they believe power is located. Students will then investigate the different factors that may cause this distribution of power. They will be using what they learned in statistics to do this and implement their knowledge using the distinctions between correlation and causation. They will use Gapminder© and have the opportunity to manipulate different variables and indicators that will conclude with a discussion about correlation and causation.

Students will then be asked to look into the power structure in the wider U.S. and analyze where power is located in terms of institutions. They will begin this inquiry by searching for 2 articles through a reputable online source that discusses power structures in the U.S. One of the articles should address an institution that has lost its political or social power, such as the Catholic church during the Reformation (relating back to the Social Studies class). Students will use their research to explain the different institutions they have discovered to determine who holds power in their community. This should be supported the data analysis they conducted as well as discussing factors that affect the distribution of power.

From the students' community research, they will have the opportunity to work either individually or in groups to present on the experiences and lessons they learned from their time in the field. They can make use of their choice of medium to present based on their choice of modality that best suits them. They will be evaluated on the amount of reflection their project shows and how knowledgeable they were on their material. They will be required to complete a reflection within one week of presenting on how they felt they did. Students will also write a reflection on the whole learning experience, explaining how they felt learning about their community and what they have learned about the power structures.

#### Connection to the Standards:

Our curriculum connects to the state-mandated social studies and Common Core math standards. Our social studies class will study the Reformation movement in Europe using examples from the Catholic Church to discuss instances of historical power. This aligns with the state standard:

- The Reformation introduced changes in religion including the emergence of Protestant faiths and a decline in the political power and social influence of the Roman Catholic Church (Ohio Dept. of Education, 2017).

In math, the research conducted by students relates to the CCS "use random sampling to draw inferences about a population" (CCSSI, 2017). More specifically, students will:

- Understand that statistics can be used to gain information about a population by examining a sample of the population; generalizations about a population from a sample are valid only if the sample is representative of that population.
- Understand that random sampling tends to produce representative samples and support valid inferences.

In synthesizing the information found in their communities, students will also implement these other math standards:

- Identify representative, random, and biased samples (7-CC.6)
- Use data from a random sample to draw inferences about a population with an unknown characteristic of interest. Generate multiple samples (or simulated samples) of the same size to gauge the variation in estimates or predictions
- Estimate population size using proportions (7-J.12)

By doing this research students will make connections between history and current interpretations of power. Students will be following state-mandated curriculum in both their social studies and math classes but also will be gaining an understanding of issues related to power. We believe it is through these types of understandings that self-empowerment can work to prevent a continued STPP.

## Appendix C

### Curriculum Project Three

**Leveling the Playing Field:  
Establishing an Equitable Classroom Community for LGBTQ Students**  
Brittany Kern-Hochstetler and Megan Terlau

*Rationale for Unit*

There is no specific lesson, or age, where ‘males’ and ‘females’ are explicitly taught how to act. Most of these gender directives are being subconsciously taught in schools and throughout society; incorporated in other subjects and lessons. Social and educational directives instruct females to avoid conflict and to prioritize others’ feelings above their own. ‘Males’ receive the cultural message that emphasizes being unfeminine. The concepts of femininity and masculinity are often portrayed as being opposites which contributes to the idea of homosexuality representing “gender inversion” and the stereotyping of gay men as “effeminate” (Bem, 1993). The system of gender enforcement that is subconsciously taught in schools leads to a restriction of individual preferences and maltreatment of those who violate social gender norms. Those who act outside of the “norm” are ostracized, which can lead to low self-esteem and depression and bring a person’s being into question.

In addition to gender norms, Many LGBTQ students struggle with feeling safe in their own classrooms. Schools are not taking the proper steps to end the bullying of youth that identify as LGBTQ. Students who identify as LGBTQ can experience harassment from peers and teachers. If the bullying targeted toward LGBTQ students is not prevented by schools and educators, it could lead to youth suicides (Jacob, 2013). Too many times educators turn their heads to the problems that are going on in their own schools. Educators often let the stigmas of the LGBTQ community dictate their classroom environments only reinforcing heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the normalization of a heterosexual dominant culture.

In order to create conditions for students to empower themselves, teachers must design curriculum that is inclusive and provides students with awareness of the LGBTQ community. Studies have revealed that by creating an inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum, schools can decrease discrimination and create more equitable educational opportunities for all students (Snapp et al., 2015). One way to create inclusive curriculum is by incorporating LGBTQ literature since the LGBTQ community is almost nonexistent in school literature. This lack of representation can cause LGBTQ students to feel isolated, unsure of themselves and their identity, and unwelcome in their community. This is why it needs to be the teacher’s job to choose literature and supplemental curriculum that includes LGBTQ representation. Schools are more likely to have academically successful students when the classroom settings and curriculum that are reflective of all students. By using a democratic way to write and create curriculum, we are instilling the important values of justice and equity (Beane, 2005).

Sample Lesson Topic Timeline

**Week 1: Mythbusters**

- “Busting” the stereotypes and stigmas about the LGBTQ community with statistics and facts.

**Week 2: Sexual Identities**

- Talking about and defining different sexual identities.

**Week 3: LGBTQ History**

- Learning about the history and struggle that have gotten the LGBTQ community where it is today.

**Week 4: Awareness and Oppression**

- Focusing on awareness and oppression that exist in today’s world. Learning about the different kinds of discrimination taking place right in front of them.

**Week 5: LGBTQ Health**

- Highlighting LGBTQ issues of mental health, bullying, suicide, etc.

- Bringing in speakers from the community.

#### **Weeks 6-7 Activist Project**

- LGBTQ activist will come in at the beginning of the week and students will then research an important historical/ LGBTQ figure.

#### **Week 8 Intersectionalities**

- How racism, homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism are all systems of oppression

#### **Week 9 Reflection**

- Reflecting on the past eight weeks

Below is a more specific breakdown of how to go about the research project (for both the individual as well as the group).

#### ***How can we become active members of society and begin dismantling heteronormativity?***

##### Student Performance Objectives:

- Find sources and pull out important points/data
- Utilize multiple sources to create an informed opinion piece
- Use data to create a pie chart that supports an argument
- Identify important themes to create a multimedia presentation
- Begin to understand public issues by analyzing multiple sources

Key Academic Language: activism, LGBTQ+, heteronormativity, queer

##### Procedures:

We will have the students look at current LGBTQ activist articles using bookmarked websites that are deemed appropriate for middle school students (i.e. Teaching Tolerance, The Trevor Project, or GLSNE). By researching important LGBTQ issues and members of the LGBTQ community, students will be able to diversify their knowledge on these social justice issues. The research project will aid students in gaining a critical lens through researching articles and websites that pertain to their topic. This research can help dismantle social norms and heteronormative culture that heterosexual students might come into the classroom with. These projects will also help LGBTQ-identified students feel represented in the curriculum. The LGBTQ activists that they research will provide powerful role models to students by reflecting how they inspired change. Finally, these projects will empower all students to question social norms and allow them to potentially initiate change.

##### Connection to the Standards:

Given the controversy of this topic (see [PBS News story](#)), it is imperative we defend the need for this curriculum using both the National and state-mandated social studies and language arts standards. Specifically, for the social studies the learning outcomes relate to our State's "Civic Participation and Skills" (Ohio Dept. of Education, 2017).

- Individuals can better understand public issues by gathering and interpreting information from multiple sources.
- Data can be displayed graphically to effectively and efficiently communicate information

In the lessons, students are given time to research and look into LGBTQ social justice issues that affect the community around them. Students will be given laptops with bookmarked websites to search for articles, blogs, and other sources that they will use to explore different LGBTQ issues, and use this to guide their own position on an issue. Once they have accumulated sufficient sources and determined the issue they wish to advocate for, they will accumulate a paper that helps them bring together the information they have gathered.

Secondly, within the English/Language Arts Common Core Standards, (CCSSI, 2017) this work relates to the standard, "Research to build and present knowledge:"

- Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

By doing this research, students will become experts on activists and will then combine the different research they have found and write a paper that analyzes, reflects on their own beliefs, and provides justifications for what they believe from their own research.