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ABSTRACT

Within the past decade and a half, education policies in the United States have become more standards-based and thus more restrictive. No Child Left Behind, under President Bush's administration, began placing heavy weight on tests to measure student achievement (Klein, 2015); the Common Core State Standards Initiative, under President Obama's administration, continued the curriculum standardization and increased connections to performance evaluations of teachers (Gewertz, 2015). The standardization that currently characterizes American schools poses several issues for students, especially those on the margins of society—socially, culturally, and economically. Classroom culture, especially under the standardization movement, is culturally biased and leaves few opportunities for traditionally marginalized students to feel at home and welcomed (Irvine, 2003, p. 6). Further, the different high-stakes tests mandated by current education policies take student individuality out of education and overlook marginalized students, as the information and testing practices reflect nothing of their own cultures (McCleskey, 2014). Similarly, despite policymakers' communicated intentions to create equal learning experiences for all students, their plans are failing because they are relying on equality rather than equity (Irvine, 2003). Lastly, instructional methods, specifically as they are used with marginalized students, reveal color-blindness that, despite teachers' intentions, are harming our students rather than empowering them (Garces, 2016).

Using Students' Contextual Frameworks to Provide Equitable Education through the New
Literacy Studies, Social Justice Education, and Intentional Practices

by

Andrea L. DeSantis

Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Undergraduate Research Honors Distinction for the

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Mentor: Dr. Joseph Feinberg

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Introduction

The goal of this thesis is to provide a resource for teachers who desire equitable classrooms. In order to achieve this goal, I will first review the reasons behind the state of our current classroom practices and to propose solutions for classroom teachers. Although teachers have limited capacity to directly affect policies, we can work to improve learning experiences for those most affected by the policies. In order to ensure equitable environments for all students, my literature review shows adopting New Literacy Studies (NLS) as a perspective as well as SJE as a framework will help to positively shape classroom culture and routines. Moreover, several practical instructional strategies are provided for teacher to use when adopting these concepts.

In the first section of this paper, I will critically review the education policies and the impact of these policies on students, especially those from marginalized cultures, in order to challenge the biases and consequential oppression plaguing American education (Freire, 2014, p. 72). In the next section, I will summarize the New Literacy Studies in detail and then follow with a relevant discussion on SJE and provide a framework teachers can use to ensure they are creating Anti-bias classrooms in which students with different literacies and cultures will thrive. Lastly, I will provide a survey of practices teachers can adopt to ensure they are teaching in line with the New Literacy Studies and achieving the goals of SJE.

1. Where the Problem Began: American Pedagogy to Date

Policy before 2009

In 2002, policy makers launched the American education system into a high-stakes and standards-based movement when No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was implemented. According to Klein (2015), NCLB “grew out of concern that the American education system was no longer internationally competitive” and thus increased student achievement accountability at

the state level. Initially well-supported, especially by Civil Rights advocates who supported the bill “for its emphasis on improving scores for students of color, those living in poverty, new English learners, and students with disabilities,” NCLB did display minute positive characteristics (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 67). Thus, NCLB focused on long-standing inequalities in schools, most often marked by differences in race and class (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.67). Further, the bill focused heavily on addressing inequalities in America’s schools by guaranteeing students’ rights “to qualified teachers” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 67).

However, according to many pedagogy and literacy researchers such as Carris (2011), Cope and Kalantzis (2015), Darling-Hammon (2010), Edwards et al. (2010), Garces and Hopkins (2016), Graff (2011), and Lee (2014), NCLB had negative impacts that seemed to outweigh the positive outcomes. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), for instance, NCLB placed too much reliance on high-stakes testing (p. 67). The state governments placed more pressure on schools to produce well-equipped and knowledgeable students. Evidence of schools’ success began relying more heavily on standardized tests, and it “penalized schools who don’t show improvement” (Lee, Andrew a, 2015). Further, the bill forced a type of “one size fits all” mentality on the educational system (Carris, 2011, p.3). Overall, curriculum characterized by Eurocentrism, “a form of vestigial thinking which permeates and structures *contemporary* practices and representations even after the formal end of colonialism,” undermined thinking processes and experiences of those who did not fit in metaphorical boxes in which policy makers assumed students should fall (Shohat, 1994, p. 2). In fact, Carris (2011) describes Eurocentric curriculum as “based on white supremacist notions,” and states that NCLB was a “Traditional ‘Eurocentric, scientific framework designed to validate particular experiences, defined by ‘race’/ethnicity, class, and gender, while invalidating others”” (p. 32-33). Moreover, while discussing the

different literacy programs born out of NCLB, Carris (2011) makes the following statements: “a population of non-reading adolescents persists, as these programs (a) do not root literacy development in meaningful practices connected to students’ lives and (b) cannot address the economic, social, and political forces at play” (p. 3). Largely, high-stakes testing as it was utilized through the NCLB has transformed academic accountability within the United States by relying on high-stakes testing to “make important educational decisions” (Carris, 2011, p. 2). Further research about NCLB’s influence on high-stakes testing can be found in works by Nichols et al. (2005) and the New York State Education Department (2004).

Policy 2009-present

Fortunately, NCLB’s pitfalls and insufficiencies became apparent to policy makers, and in 2009 the lawmakers replaced NCLB with the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSI) (Gewertz, 2015). In general, CCSI’s original intent was to “help all students acquire the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and the workforce” (Barone, 2014). The standards this initiative carries with it, which were originally adopted by most states, suggest “that creating one set of challenging academic expectations for all students would improve achievement and college readiness” (Gewertz, 2015). CCSI standardizes content areas from federal and state levels. Nonetheless, many states started dropping Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2015 for several reasons. Gewertz (2015) explains that teachers opposed the standards’ stepped-up “focus on nonfiction” because they feared it would “downgrade the place of good literature in education,” while others complained that the standards focused on cold-readings “without any background knowledge.” Further, some teachers reported standards being at higher developmental levels than what is appropriate for the designated grades, and math and science teachers complained that the standards did not actually prepare students for

math and science focuses in college (Gewertz, 2015). Consequently, schools began developing their own sets of standards, which are still similar to CCSS but tailored more towards their own schools systems (Gewertz, 2015).

Not long after the Common Core State Standards Initiative was implemented, Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA) was proposed as a new bipartisan reform under President Obama to enforce standards alongside CCSSI and in lieu of the prior NCLB Act (Lee, 2015). Although not fully put into place until the 2017-2018 school year, this legislation endeavors to lessen the weight of standardized tests while still requiring some (Lee, Andrew b, 2015). The bill also lessens federal authority over school and teacher accountability while handing more of it over to the state governments—states will begin receiving more freedom to set their own goals and monitor their own progresses rather than awaiting federal observations (Lee, 2015). Further, states will be allowed to choose one alternative measure for evaluating their schools (Lee, 2015). Policymakers’ original intent in creating ESSA was to “create a better law that focused on the clear goal of fully preparing all students for success in college and careers” (Every, 2016, Summary, para. 4). The most interesting aspect of this reform, arguably, is that it requires states to develop a second unit of measurement to use in evaluating their schools; this improvement hints at an increasing emphasis on school individuality (Lee, 2015).

Concerns

With the latest education policies and the influences they have had on pedagogical choices—which will be explained in this section—within the limitations of CCSSI, come many concerns that are driving forces of this thesis. For instance, marginalized students are most often underrepresented in their classrooms because the culture of their classrooms reflect lives unlike their own; learning experiences provided to them in class are far removed from their daily lives,

and this discrepancy makes it difficult for them to meet the standard of success in their classrooms. According to Carris (2011), “Discourse among educational policymakers seldom pertains to this population of adolescents who read below a 3rd grade reading level;” (p. 2, 22). She further explains the longstanding lack of attention and devaluation of struggling readers and historically underrepresented students have faced within the traditional classroom. While marginalized and mainstream students both walk into their classrooms with schemas shaped by their contexts, a problem arises with the difference between mainstream and marginalized students’ experiences in the classroom, as the classroom culture is most familiar with those mainstream students, leaving marginalized students unnoticed (Irvine, 2003, p. 6).

Another concern with recent pedagogical choices is the institutional bias towards white, upper-middle class society. This bias disregards useful schemas which marginalized students bring with them when entering their classrooms. Further, this bias is apparent through common ideologies represented in teaching rhetoric, as “...a way of teaching is never innocent. Every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology,” (Berlin, 1988, p. 492). Further, Berlin (1988) describes three types of rhetoric teachers use in choosing instructional methods. Each rhetoric points to specific ideologies that characterize current educational policy choices; these ideologies reveal the institutional bias previously mentioned and indicate possible ways to combat them through pedagogical choices. According to Berlin, social epistemic is one of the three ideologies with a focus on literacy as a socially constructed ideology and, therefore, dependent on an individual’s culture, community, experiences, et cetera (Berlin, 1988, p. 478). This rhetorical approach suggests that knowledge and the absolute truthfulness of it is not stagnant; it can be easily challenged, and its purpose can be critically questioned in order to reveal bias towards or against a group of people (Berlin, 1988, 489). Under the social epistemic rhetorical thinking process,

how a student “understands and is affected by material conditions is circumscribed by socially-devised definitions, by the community in which the subject lives” (Berlin, 1988, p. 489). The bias underlying current pedagogical ideologies places power on dominant culture through facts, knowledge, and learning methods forced upon students without further inquiry. According to Berlin, educators need to ask ourselves the following questions: “(1) What are the effects of our knowledge? (2) Who benefits from a given version of the truth? (3) To whom does our knowledge designate power?” (Berlin, 1988, p. 489). Further, the standards require all children from both mainstream and marginalized communities to learn and demonstrate the same skills, despite their ecological differences. David Barton (2007) articulates the problem with standardization when he argues, “Children who do not know mainstream ways of making meaning still know other ways, but, with or without print literacy, the ways different cultures make meaning rarely enter into the school when the minority child enters school” (p. 181). Current perspective on literacy, which is characterized by binaries of literate versus illiterate, right versus wrong, reading versus non-reading, etc., drives these current standards and broader curriculum, consequently excluding students who *are* literate but are so in ways not easily recognized in dominant culture (Barton, 2007).

An additional downside of the latest education standards and their consequences on classrooms is that they incorporate content and thinking processes entirely irrelevant to many students while leaving little room for flexibility. For instance, the standards focuses “too much on ‘cold readings’ of complex text without any background preparation,” and without consideration to the different ways in which students actually comprehend and process (Gewertz, 2015). Furthermore, much like Neil McCleskey (2014) argues in his article, “Common Core Treats Students Like Soulless Widgets,” the CCSSI fundamentally ignores students’ uniqueness.

Students learn differently and express themselves differently; they all have many, distinct talents and ambitions that drive their learning (McCleskey, 2014), yet the standards “privilege a traditional and corporate-friendly lingua franca” (Burns, 2012, p. 95). Students’ individualities are most likely why “there is no meaningful empirical evidence that national standards produce better outcomes, and education experts across the spectrum have dismissed the Core” (McCleskey, 2014). Burns (2012) similarly confronts the standards’ inadequacies when she condemns their authors for the policy’s paradox through insufficient evidence for CCSSI’s effectiveness (p. 95). She highlights that CCSSI’s authors even specify that their standards are not prescriptions for academic achievement because they will not be relevant to every student, yet they are presented and treated as such (Burns, 2012, p. 94).

Further, another concern with current standards within the CCSSI and the pedagogical choices they encourage is the dehumanizing effect its high-stakes testing is having on schools and, more specifically, their students. McKay (2015) illustrates this argument when she describes testing as having a “zombifying” effect. She describes a protest led by the Providence Student Union of Providence, Rhode Island where students confronted the effects of high-stakes testing (McKay 2015). During the protest, one student proclaimed,

To base our whole education, our whole future, on a single test score is to take away our life—to make us undead. That’s why we’re here today, in front of the RIDE, as the zombies this policy will turn so many of us into. We’re here to say: No Education, No Life. (McKay, 2015)

Other students point out equity as the underlying issue of high-stakes testing. “This policy disproportionately puts low-income students, students of color, students learning English, and students with disabilities at high risk of being denied a diploma,” (McKay, 2015). Alongside this

protest, an experiment was conducted to reveal the irrationality of these tests. Approximately 50 college-educated, professional adults took an imitation version of the NECAP, a high stakes test used in Rhode Island schools, created entirely by the NECAP questions the Rhode Island Department of Education releases and with the estimated “ratio terms of content, format, and ‘depth of knowledge’ questions as the real test, “ (McKay, 2015). The experiment’s conclusion was that “Every member of the Rhode Island Board of Regents who had voted for the testing policy declined to participate in the event, as did the director of the state’s Teach For America and the spokesperson for Rhode Island Democrats for Education Reform” (McKay, 2015). The results of the experiment, with a test comprised of questions released directly by the Rhode Island Department of Education as NECAP questions available to the public, showed that 60% of successful adults failed the test; “the fable of the necessity of standardized tests to produce a ‘career ready’ populace had been vanquished” (McKay, 2015).

An additional concern with the latest education standards is the overall misconception that equality will uplift struggling, marginalized students, while the solution truly lies in educational *equity*. The primary difference between educational equality and educational equity is that equality places all students on an equal playing field despite differences, while equity considers those differences and accommodates for them to foster success. Jacqueline Irvine (2003) provides an explanation of the difference between equality and equity in education when she compares each side-by-side; some of the differences she explains are the following:

- Equality implies standardization, whereas equity implies personalization.
- Equality implies competition, whereas equity implies collaboration.
- Equality implies knowledge transmission, whereas equity implies construction.

-Equality implies “one Eurocentric history,” whereas equity implies multiple histories (p. 64).

Lastly, a concern with current pedagogical choices that characterize current educational experiences in contemporary schools is the typical teaching approach, especially in the confines of schools with students of color. Ultimately, these approaches consistently derive from the color-blindness mentality. Recent policies can be characterized as “race-neutral,” which assumes that not recognizing differences among teachers and students is the best approach because it is “fair” to all students (Garces, 2016, p. 218). Rather than opening doors for diverse learning approaches and content foci by using students’ differences to the advantage of *everyone*, this color-blindness in the classroom only “operates to protect White advantage” (Garces, 2016, p. 218). Nonetheless, I believe that this color-blindness mentality, as well as the many additional concerns I have discussed, can be solved through adopting the perspective of the New Literacy Studies and through the adaption of critical frameworks and practices.

2. Moving Forward: A Fresh Perspective through New Literacy Studies

Despite the previously-expressed concerns with the current classroom practices as influenced by modern education policy, strategies exist to navigate through these concerns and still provide equitable educational experiences to all students. In this section, I will discuss the first approach in shifting classroom traditions in order to allow for equity, which is adopting the New Literacies Studies (NLS) Perspective. Specifically, I will define NLS in detail, and I will draw connections between it and education through utilizing students’ contextual frameworks.

What is New Literacy Studies?

The first approach in confronting the equity issues within current education reform and pedagogical practice comes with a shift in perspective through NLS. The “new” aspect of this perspective has evolved from dissecting mainstream society’s perspective on literacy as simply one’s ability to read and write and autonomous in being able to single-handedly upholding members of society socially and economically. According to Edwards (2010) and other authors of *Change is Gonna Come: Transforming Literacy Education for African American Students*, the operational definition for literacy as it functions in schools is “reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills” and is often recognized in schools as the mainstream manner of conducting oneself in society (Edwards, 2010, p. 6). Literacy has obtained a reputation of being considerably autonomous in nature, meaning that texts and their meanings do not depend on any environmental factors and can fix a society’s problems on its own. This belief in literacy’s ability to bring someone economic proliferation and greater social status is what Harvey Graff (1979) has titled the Literacy Myth. In short, NLS is a relatively new and much more complicated perspective on literacy than commonly conceptualized. The New Literacy Studies perspective characterizes literacy as ecological and multimodal. Further, the perspective considers “how literacy practices are linked to people’s lives, identities, and social affiliations” (Compton-Lilly, 2009, p. 88). When Catherine Compton-Lilly (2009) refers to “literacy practices” throughout her book, she is referring to the events that occur throughout each individual’s life which require them to read, hear, and/or experience moments which they then process, organize, and communicate; in essence, a literacy practice is anything that requires a literacy. Further, when I write “a literacy,” I am agreeing with Compton-Lilly (2009) in suggesting that there is no single type of literacy, just as New Literacy Studies suggest as well. Instead of defining literacy as

one's ability to read and write in the manner in which the dominant culture has deemed "correct," New Literacy Studies suggests "thinking about the ways people make meaning with language," (Rowse, 2011, p. 55). This new perspective, thus, considers all of the ways people communicate with others while suggesting, "there are many different literacies that shift with contexts, texts, and the identities of people using literacy" (Rowse, 2011, p. 55).

How does New Literacy Studies perspective connect to the classroom?

In short, the New Literacy Studies entwines seamlessly with education through its critical emphasis on students' contexts in determining how they comprehend, process, organize, and communicate information. In order to fill a gap in the literature, I have adopted terminology common in other fields, "contextual frameworks", to fulfill my goal in arguing for an emphasis on students' contexts as a primary factor in making curricular choices. The term, "contextual frameworks" is easy to understand once its smaller parts are dissected. Prendergast (1999) clearly defines the literal definition of context as "another text or body of texts that goes 'with' ('con') the text under scrutiny" (p. 91). This definition can be broadened into meaning anything "in language or articulable in language" (Prendergast, 1999, p. 91). The context can be historical, social, familial, economic, and/or cultural and further refer to "the whole sphere of material and social life, such that, in one very influential model of text and context can include economy, the sphere of economic determinations pressing on the cultural sphere, the medium of which being ideology" (Prendergast, 1999, p. 91). Moreover, a simple definition for framework is "a structure or model that helps us make meaning of issues or phenomena in ways that lead to greater clarity and coherence," (Houtman, 2013). Therefore, moving forward in this paper, the term "contextual framework" will refer to the interrelated conditions, including their social, home, economic, and cultural environments forming students' cognitive structures inside and outside academic

settings. The shortage of published definitions of the term in reference to considering students' lives outside the classroom as determinants for how they comprehend, process, organize, and communicate is what forced me to piece together my own definition for the purpose of my research. I did not discover the term "contextual framework" in an article, book, nor any other source I skimmed through in beginning my research. Although I had heard it within the contexts of sociology, I could not locate it specifically within the context of education.

Substantial literature written about the New Literacy Studies affirms the importance of students' contextual frameworks. In all of the articles and books I read that discussed New Literacy Studies, multiliteracies, ELA pedagogy, or an outright rejection of the current standards-based curriculum, the term "context" focused my attention. I read about different students whose lives outside of school walls looked nothing like the ones they were forced to reflect inside of the schools when reviewing literature by Barton (2007), Berlin (1988), Burns (2012), Compton-Lilly (2009), Darling-Hammond (2010), Emdin (2016), Garces (2016), and Graff (2011) among others; the information and instructional methods were not relatable to them either. New Literacy Studies literature expounds on terms such as "multiliteracies," "sociocultural," and "socially-constructed" to affirm the significance of students' contextual frameworks in understanding how they comprehend and communicate. Graff (2011) describes multiliteracies to be "dimensions beyond traditional alphabetical or 'textual' literacy—the domain of many proclaimed 'new literacies'—from digital and visual to 'scientific' and spatial, and beyond," (p. 68). Further, according to De Valenzuela (2002), the term "sociocultural" implies that "higher order functions develop out of social interaction." Lastly, within the context of literacy, "socially-constructed" implies that "the construction of literacy is embedded in the discursive practices and power relations of everyday life," (Street, 1993, p.8).

Furthermore, Gee (2012) argues that people make meaning of words and texts differently depending on the contexts from which they learn language, and he highlights the disconnection marginalized students face when attempting to acclimate in the classroom. He writes about the differences in discourse between teachers and non-mainstream students; teachers expect these non-mainstream students to quickly adopt the language of power to demonstrate common ways of speaking, writing, and thinking when these same students are not only unfamiliar with these ways of communication, because of their different cultures, but are also unprepared by their teachers to adopt it (Gee, 2012). Furthermore, the authors of *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies*, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2015), explain a common classroom framework known as “didactic pedagogy,” which essentially means students are “told things” rather than encouraged to find the answers themselves (p. 7). This pedagogy is most often revealed through frequent direct instruction, during which students have no opportunities to ask questions that could further their knowledge and help make deeper connections to themselves and their own contexts (pp. 7-8). Another example of this didactic pedagogy is a “banking”; Freire describes this common instructional method, which provides students with opportunities that end with “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” of teachers’ lessons (Freire, 2000, p. 72).

Alongside Gee and other New Literacy Study authors, David Barton (2007), supports the significance of students’ contexts to their learning. In *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*, he emphasizes literacy’s direct ties to people’s social, cultural, economic, and inherited conditions when he assigns the metaphor of ecology to the concept of literacy. He emphasizes the various roles literacy plays in people’s lives and that these roles change depending on the situations and contexts that people experience (Barton, 2007, pp. 34-35). Moreover, he confronts the disconnection between literacy practices at home and at school. He

emphasizes the importance of the home as the initial place where students learn the specific literacy practices common in their communities (Barton, 2007, p. 181). During the first years of their lives, these students understand what it means to make meaning and communicate as is typical in their communities and build upon their schemata, "an active organization of past reactions, or of past experiences, which must always be—supposed to be—operating in any well-adapted organic response," with these understandings (Brewer, 1984, p. 3). These schemas, especially those of non-mainstream students, are not only disrupted but also undermined with they step into the classroom and witness literacy practices entirely unlike those common to them and their specific communities. The problem that both underlies and continues this disruption is that “with or without print literacy, the ways different cultures make meaning rarely enter the school when a minority child enters the school” (Barton, 2007, p. 181).

Moreover, in *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Brian Street (1993) supports with experimental research much of what other NLS authors argue. He describes studies, which offer support of the New Literacy Studies, conducted by different researchers on a variety of people groups. Through these studies, he illustrates the different experiences cultures have with literacy as well as their beliefs about language; the various experiences differ and depend on the practices and traditions of the various cultures. For instance, Street (1993) explains that indigenous Nukulaelae islanders communicate with one another based upon the traditions and understandings within their individual cultural contexts; their words do not mean the same universally. Further, in Gapun, a rural town in Papa New Guinea, transmitting words through reading and writing most often occurs only within the contexts of religious practices and relationship building (Street, 1993, p. 33).

3. Moving Forward: A New Framework through Social Justice Education

After adopting ideas from NLS that allow for each student's method of communication to constitute as a literacy, despite how far the method deviates from the norm, the next approach to moving towards providing equitable learning experiences is through implementing the Social Justice Education (SJE) framework. In this section, I will define SJE and discuss its principles, explain its significance in developing fair classrooms, and outline practical ways to implement SJE.

What is Social Justice Education?

Social Justice Education (SJE) is a framework that combines an interdisciplinary theory of investigating oppression with pedagogical principles that analyze the prevalence of oppression in students' communities (Adams, 2016, p. 4). The following principles summarize the elements of social justice for learning:

“Principle 1: Create and maintain a welcoming and inclusive social justice learning environment based on clear norms and guidelines agreed to by the entire learning community.

Principle 2: Help participants acknowledge their own multiple positions within systems of inequality in order to understand how oppression operates on multiple levels.

Principle 3: Anticipate, acknowledge, and balance the emotional with the cognitive components of SJE learning.

Principle 4: Draw upon the knowledge and experiences of participants and intergroup dynamics in the room to illustrate and discuss social justice content.

Principle 5: Encourage active engagement with the issues and collaboration among participants.

Principle 6: Foster and evaluate personal awareness, acquisition of knowledge and skills, and action-planning process to create change,” (Adams, 2016, p. 38).

Why is SJE important to emphasize in the classroom?

Incorporating social justice topics in curriculum allows for a diverse group of students to engage in meaningful, holistic learning experiences that connect to their lives and teach them to think critically about their circumstances for the sake of social justice (Adams, 2016, p. 29).

Rather than simply preparing students to be efficient learners, social justice learning prepares them to be productive and engaged members of society with a focus on justice. As a powerful example, Torres (2015), an English teacher from Honolulu, Hawaii, shares her thoughts on why teaching social justice in the classroom is important when she writes the following.

So, it is often not easy. It sometimes doesn't feel good and rarely ends in simple answers.

Still, as an educator I must ensure that each student who enters my room at some point leaves feeling empowered to stand up for what they believe in. (Torres, 2015)

Furthermore, although Ropers-Huilman (1999) intended her article for collegiate pedagogy, her words point to the overall significance of students' contexts as they relate to SJE: “Teaching and learning exist always in the context, and they depend on that context for knowing both ‘what works’ and what will produce harmful effects,” (p. 91). In essence, incorporating social justice topics in curriculum aims to provide unbiased learning environments for all students, as “the priority of social justice educators is to affirm, model, and sustain socially just learning environments for all participants, and by so modeling, to offer hope that equitable relations and social structures can be achieved in broader society” (Adams, 2016, p. 27).

What are ways to implement SJE?

One way to implement SJE in the classroom is by using the Anti-bias framework to formulate meaningful lessons in the classroom. An Anti-bias framework is one that places existing content standards into lessons that emphasize unveiling bias in society and acting towards justice. Topics of the Anti-Bias curriculum fall into the following four categories: identity, diversity, justice, and action (Teaching, n.d.). This resource provides justice-oriented topics with which to frame lessons. Teaching Tolerance (n.d.) also provides lessons and activities for when justice-oriented topics seem abstract to the teacher.

Allowing students to create their own classroom norms is another way to incorporate SJE, because it takes the power of deciding behavioral norms and interpretations of them away from the teacher and places it in the hands of the students, and it is completed in their languages, thus allowing them to feel familiar and comfortable in the classroom. Classroom norms differ from rules because norms are lists of student-generated agreements upon how to conduct oneself and participate inside the classroom, rather than being teacher-generated lists of “do’s” and “don’ts” (Schoenbach, 2012, p. 63). The teacher asks the students to collaboratively generate solutions to possible problems that could present themselves in the classroom throughout the year, and the students decide what each norm looks like to them—see Figure 1 for an example of how to develop classroom norms with students (Schoenbach, 2012, p. 64).

Another simple way to incorporate SJE into the classroom is to choose literature that falls in line with “critical literacy”, which uses texts “ for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane,” (Shor, 1999). These types of texts will direct students to important and relevant justice issues about which they will realize their own biases. Becky Ropers-Huilman (1999) provides examples of how to incorporate this type of

literature into lessons in which students must analyze the situations presented and then respond to them with their own opinions (Soares, 2010, p. 490). During the analysis process, the teacher asks unbiased questions that will facilitate students' discussion in order to reveal to students their own biases about topics (Ropers-Huilman, 1999). For example, Ropers-Huilman, (1999) explains a moment in his classroom in which, through discussion over a particular article, he—the teacher—and his students realized how their backgrounds and upbringings shaped how they felt and reacted to the text's topic, sexuality (p. 92). Further, research has concluded that this critical approach to literacy education specifically is successful in engaging students and fostering critical thinking about diversity and justice, and Cheesman (2010) includes examples in her article. For example, Cheesman (2010) describes a variety of studies in which researchers conclude that teachers' perspectives on students of varying races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses begin to shape their students' learning experiences, students' perspectives on themselves and are influenced by the texts provided by their teachers, and students display interest in other cultures when given the opportunity to read about them (pp. 91-92). Further, while most anti-bias, social justice-oriented topics can easily connect to the English and Language Arts content when using critical texts, examples of incorporating critical literacy into other contents include the following:

Social Studies:

- In classes of predominantly low-income students living in neighborhoods facing the effects of gentrification, teachers can use literature about gentrification to frame lessons on the vocabulary and effects of the Industrial Revolution on different social groups.
- Teachers can use literature about modern slavery reparations to frame lessons on the Reconstruction and how our government should approach slavery reparations today.

-In classes of students residing in areas currently facing environment problems, teachers can use literature about environmental concerns in their areas and what is being done about them to frame lessons on a region's environmental issues and what community members can do to help.

Science:

-In classes of students living in areas with no health foods store nearby, teachers can use literature about community gardens to frame a unit on plant growth and how to grow fruits and vegetables for one's own community.

-In classes of students living in areas with no gyms or fitness centers, teachers can use literature about the effects of exercise on the body to frame a unit on health, fitness, and what they can do to promote healthy living among their peers and communities.

Math:

-In classes of students from under-developed communities, teachers can use literature about their local Parks and Recreational Department to frame a unit on geometry and what students can do to push for outdoor community centers, courts, and parks.

-Teachers can use literature on recent killings of people of color by police to frame lessons on data analysis and statistics in order to come to an informed conclusion about whether or not a correlation exists between shootings and victims' ethnicities.

4. Moving Forward: Intentional Practice

After adopting NLS and SJE, the final approach to moving towards equity in classrooms is applying new practices through pedagogical choices and strategies. In recent years, there have been a number of curricular developments to push for more inclusive classroom environments that bear in mind students' contexts and push for justice-oriented lessons; some practices

accomplish all of these goals I mention while some can be used in combination. To highlight the importance of utilizing students' contextual frameworks and using education for social justice to provide more equitable learning experiences for all students, Zamel (1998) quotes Gee's following statement about marginalized students' struggles when navigating dominant culture: "The non-mainstream child will always have more conflicts in using and thus mastering dominant secondary discourses, since they conflict more seriously with his primary discourse and community-based secondary ones" (p. 58). In this section, I will discuss in detail these curricular developments and practices.

Pedagogical Choices

The collection of pedagogical choices within Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Teaching are approaches to pedagogy that promote the recognition of students' cultures and intentional use of them to improve the meaningfulness and effectiveness of learning experiences. Although Django Paris (2012) does not specifically mention New Literacy Studies or contextual frameworks, his writing on Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy reveals an emphasis on multiliteracies and students' contexts as driving forces of learning. Paris derives his concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy from the preexisting culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies (Paris, 2012). Teachers under Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy use their classrooms' diversity and individual contexts to encourage the advancement of marginalized groups and to cultivate pride and autonomy in their students (Paris, 2012). For example, in traditional classrooms, teachers have "viewed the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome in learning the demanded and legitimized dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy invites students' cultural

practices and familiar contexts into the classroom and encourages students to use their schemas and interests in producing meaningful writing (Paris, 2012).

Likewise, Paris' ideas that frame Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy mirror those that also frame Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The purpose of Culturally Responsive Teaching is to engage specific demographics of students who are typically ignored in the classrooms that have socially isolating curriculum and school cultures (Varus, 2008, p. 56). CRT specifically "acknowledges and infuses of such students into the school curriculum and make meaningful connections with community cultures" (Varus, 2008, p. 49). The reform emphasizes meaningful connections to texts and topics, and it takes purposeful action, which is relevant to students' contexts, in response (Varus, 2008). Culturally Responsive Teaching also focuses on critical thinking through Critical Pedagogy, especially in reference to systemic oppression; teachers achieve this most commonly through the texts they require their students to read (Varus, 2008). Reported outcomes of Critically Responsive Teaching include "(1) a positive image of themselves and their students, (2) democratic and inclusive culturally sensitive social relations with their students and their students' communities, and (3) a conception of knowledge as socially constructed and capable of transformation" (Varus, 2008, p. 56).

Alongside or instead of CRT, teachers can also implement Reflexive Pedagogy as a pedagogical choice to consider when implementing SJE and students' contextual frameworks as they relate to their literacy practices. Reflexive Pedagogy first examines students' schemas as they are determined in part by their contexts and builds upon those schemas as not to exclude the significances of students' contexts but rather affirm it (Cope, 2015, p. 15). The practices within Reflexive Pedagogy returns learning to "lifeworld experiences, knowledge, and prior experience, with metacognitive reflections," (Cope, 2015, p. 15). Generally, Reflexive Pedagogy helps

Figure 4.1: Classroom Norm Development**Step 1: Explain to Students the Purpose of Norms versus Rules**

Student-formulated norms allow for students to work together on creating the most beneficial classroom culture for everyone. Students have the opportunity to decide what certain behaviors and characteristics mean to them in order to ensure agreement on the operational definitions of each norm.

Step 2: Propose Possible Problems and Concerns

Teacher and students collaborate to identify possible problems or concerns that could arise in the classroom, which include the following:

- *Too many people speak at once, including teacher and students*
- *Students arrive to class late*
- *Students arrive to class with incomplete readings and/or assignments*
- *Students use profane language and/or display inappropriate behaviors*
- *Students ridicule and/or fight with one another*
- *Students use technology devices at inappropriate times and not for academic reasons*
- *Students engage in classroom discussions about sensitive and/or controversial topics*

*Other problems/concerns may be relevant in other classrooms—students and teachers should keep in mind the individual characteristics and needs of their classes.

Step 3: Place Problems and Concerns in categories of Characteristics

Teacher and students collaborate to categorize problems and concerns into categories of characteristics—examples include

- *“Too many people speak at once” → Respect*
- *“Students arrive to class late” → Punctuality*
- *“Students arrive to class with incomplete readings and/or assignments” → Respect, Preparations*
- *“Students engage in classroom discussions about sensitive and/or controversial topics” → Respect*

Step 4: Student Understandings of each characteristic as they relate to the problems and concerns discussed

Here, students collaborate with one another in groups to formulate the norms in their own words and present it along with its different implications on classroom activities on chart paper. Students vote on each norm to ensure full agreement. For example:

One group forms their own norm for Respect, keeping in mind the possible problems and concerns they discussed earlier. They consider what “respect” means to them and present the following to the class: “In order to make sure we do not all speak at once, speak while our teacher is speaking, or make it difficult for everyone to pay attention and learn in the class, we propose the following norm: ‘RESPECT: Allow everyone to be listeners and speakers. Do your best to be prepared for each day so that we all can learn well together. Remember that we are all different and have different opinions—respect those opinions.’” The class votes on the norm, and, if there are students who do not agree, further discussion while continue in order to ensure complete agreement on and understanding of the norm.

*The understandings and formulations of norms will change from class to class; a class’ understanding of respect may look different than this example.

students' use what they learn in the classroom to improve their communities and circumstances by "putting meanings and knowledge to work effectively proximate contexts," (Cope, 2015, p. 16).

Strategies

One practical technique to use when incorporating students' contexts and schemas is the **Reading Apprenticeship**. This is an interdisciplinary reading education framework that Schoenbach (2012) discusses in her book, *Reading for Understanding*. The Reading Apprenticeship incorporates students' personal, social, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions to ensure that students' contexts and well-being inside and outside of school are accounted for and utilized in the learning process; it also considers the uniqueness by which students learn and communicate, as they are all unique in and of themselves (Schoenbach, 2012, p. 17). Although a complex framework that makes attempting to summarize it difficult, the portions of Schoenbach's (2012) book that relate most to students' contexts and SJE is the "Social and Personal Dimensions" chapter. Here, the author discusses the importance of fostering healthy personal and social growth in the classroom and provides strategies to do so (p. 55). She provides examples of how to foster healthy classroom community through safe environments in which students learn through conversation scaffolding. In this process, rather than simply responding to students' contributions in classroom dialogues with a correct-versus-incorrect mentality, teachers ask questions relatable to students' communities and personal lives to further student thinking and build familiarity (Schoenbach, 2012). By using this strategy, teachers communicate to students that their thinking and communicative processes are not favorable or unfavorable in comparison to others, and that these individual processes can still be

used in finding answers.

Further, Schoenbach (2012) provides examples of how to include students' personal dimensions, including their personal differences, in the classroom to assist learning rather than ignoring them (pp. 73-85). The author explains how "setting authentic purposes" for reading is especially helpful in connecting students' personal lives to curriculum; teachers can achieve this by simple classroom dialogues in which they ask students questions that will help them connect texts to their own lives (Schoenbach, 2012, pp. 73-75). Moreover, Schoenbach (2012) also explains that teachers can build reader identity to help students understand that they are constantly engaging in literacy practices throughout the day; it is also essential to communicate that the texts they read do constitute as reading, despite mainstream's definition of reading. For example, teachers can guide students in developing their individual textual lineages with goals to keep track of reading experiences and self-monitor progress (Schoenbach, 2012, p. 31). Also, teachers can allow students opportunities to reflect on how they read and comprehend, what they read, and *why* they read in order to further develop reader identity (Schoenbach, 2012).

Including aspects of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is another way to incorporate students' contexts. By recognizing how students' contexts affect them socially and emotionally, and, by addressing those affects in the curriculum, teachers can prepare students to utilize their differences and unique backgrounds both in school and society. In addition, social and emotional learning can teach students how to respond to and accept others' differences as well to create an inclusive environment in which everyone can learn. Students, especially those from non-mainstream communities, walk into the classroom with social and emotional stressors that affect their learning and thus need help processing what occurs in their communities before processing academic topics (Carris, 2011). SEL is comprised of the following 5 categories: self-awareness,

self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Durlak, 2011). A recent study conducted by Durlak (2011) and colleagues demonstrates the effectiveness of SEL. With the incorporation of SEL in curriculum, not only did the nature of social behaviors improve, but students' academic performance "significantly improved" because their social and personal dimensions were considered and addressed. Durlak (2011) supported that teachers should recognize students' contexts and social interactions within their communities as influential in their learning progress and thus choose to address their non-academic dimensions.

Another progressive curriculum development is actually the sum of the following two student-centered instructional and assessment methods: Project-based Learning and Place-based Learning. Project-based Learning is "designed to engage students in investigation of authentic problems," while still meeting standards and supporting content knowledge (Blumenfeld, 1991, p. 369); these problems can directly connect to social justice-oriented topics as well. Likewise, Place-based Learning functions similarly to Project-based Learning, with the exception being that the problems students confront are location-specific (Gruenewald, 2008, p. xvi). Blumenfeld (1991) proposes that Project-based Learning is also a multi-faceted, motivational tool that can motivate students to learn and do far more than they would without this strategy because they must obtain deep understandings of concepts in order to meaningfully synthesize them for the betterment of their communities. Further, under Place-based Learning, students learn "the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain communities" (Gruenewald, 2008, xvi.).

Also, teaching writing from the "post-process theory" is another alternative curricular model that utilizes students' contexts. Post-process theorists believe that we cannot generalize writing, and they base their theory on the following three assumptions: "(1) writing is public, (2) writing is interpretive, and (3) writing is situated" (Kent, 1999, pp. 1-2). Post-process writing

intentionally involves writers' communities because "writing constitutes a specific communicative interaction occurring among individuals and specific historical moments and in specific relations with others and with the world" (Kent, 1999, p. 1). Rather than focusing on specific words, post-process writers critically think about their writing from their own perspectives as well as from the interpretations of others (Kent, 1991). Post-process writing relies on writers' beliefs, places, and areas of prior knowledge; in order to write effectively, post-process theorists believe that we use all of them to predict how our readers will accept and respond to them (Kent, 1999). In the classroom, for example, teachers who teach composition from a post-process perspective allow students' communities, personal beliefs and values, and specific contexts to weigh in on the directions students take their writing. Students who write from the Post-process perspective draw from their contextual frameworks in order to thoroughly consider the content, meanings, and audiences of their writing.

Next, code-switching practice that "focuses on where and how a speaker alternates between two or more languages or dialects in the context of conversation or interaction" (Edmin, 2016, p. 175.) James D. Williams (2003) explains code-switching in "Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing," which he originally intended his work for the improvement of teacher education, but the principles are applicable to middle level ELA education likewise. Williams discusses the reason why so many students never seem to grasp concepts of grammar and academic writing, despite these two concepts being two foci of English and Language Arts education. According to Williams, the disconnect occurs with the unfamiliarity; students are expected to abandon the specific contexts in which they communicate with others most often and take on completely unfamiliar ways of thinking and communicating. Further, teachers expect

them to enter an unfamiliar context in which they must communicate via techniques to which they are rarely exposed outside of the classroom (Williams, 2003).

Williams provides tangible solutions for working with this unfamiliarity rather than against it. First, he proposes allowing students to first write in their conversational voices and then transfer their writing into academic voice during the revision process. This exercise provides the freedom to write comfortably while still practicing standard ELA concepts (Williams, 2003, p. 268). Second, he suggests having students compare and contrast their own languages and voices with those that are expected in academic writing. Third, he recommends asking students to paraphrase information from academic writing in their own words in order to help them practice drawing meaning out of unfamiliar genres (Williams, 2003, p. 268). By drawing from both of the students' contexts in the ELA classrooms, teachers engage their students in a more meaningful way by noting their cultures and applying them rather than negating their significances.

Similarly, Schoenbach (2012) provides a method of including code switching by way of teaching metacognitive conversation, which is "an inquiry into how readers make sense of the text" (p. 89). The process requires students to think about how they process information and comprehend it; an effective way of doing so is through a Think Aloud or "talking to the text," which is a strategy to model "what it looks like to be mentally active when reading and specific ways of thinking that students need to develop to be successful reader of their course texts" (Schoenbach, 2012, pp. 101-102). Using metacognition, or "thinking about thinking" with students helps students transfer from their vernacular language specific to their communities to academic language; it helps them tackle difficult texts by drawing upon their prior knowledge and asking questions in reference to connections between what they know and experience and

what they are reading —see Figures 4.2 and 4.3 for examples of modeling through a Think Aloud and scaffolding students in the metacognition process (Schoenbach, 2012, 91-94).

Next, Desha Williams (2007) shares another method of including students' contexts in lessons to provide meaningful learning when she describes what she calls, "contextual teaching". Contextual teaching not only relates information to students' lives but teaches through experiences. She suggests using the following acronym, REACT, when conducting a lesson using contextual teaching:

Relate- the instructor relates the new concept to a personal experience.

Experience- Students are led through an experience to gain a deeper understanding of the concept.

Application- Students use the concept in a real-world application.

Communication- Students cooperate (share) or communicate their understanding of the concept.

Transfer- Students transfer the concept to a new situation (Williams, 2007, p. 573).

Figure 4.2- Step 1: Teacher Models Think Aloud

In this step, the teacher models talking-to-the-text by reading a passage and practicing a variety of reading comprehension strategies aloud, such as chunking, making connections, summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. Specific questions the teacher asks aloud include:

- *What is the author saying so far?*
- *What do I already know about this?*
- *Where have I seen this topic, idea, or concept before?*
- *What does this remind me of?*
- *What do I think is going to happen because what has happened so far in the text?*

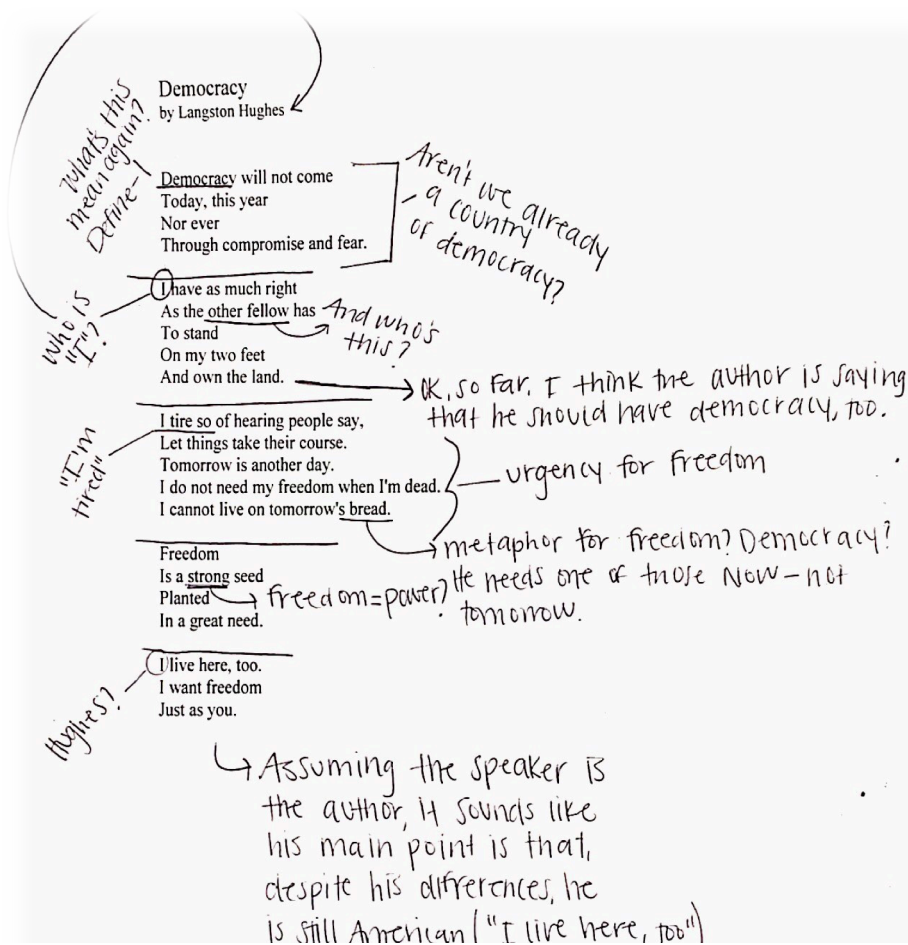


Figure 4.3- Step 2: Students Perform Think Aloud with Support from A Graphic Organizer

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Summarize Chunks:</p> <p><i>Summarize each stanza in 5 words or less</i></p> <p>Stanza 1: _____</p> <p>Stanza 2: _____</p> <p>Stanza 3: _____</p> <p>Stanza 4: _____</p> <p>Stanza 5: _____</p> | <p>Clarify:</p> <p><i>What words or phrases from the text are new to you? Note them and find their meanings via a dictionary or context-clues.</i></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> |
| <p>Make Connections:</p> <p><i>What connections can you make between the text, your experiences, conversations, or other texts you have read?</i></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> | <p>Make a prediction:</p> <p><i>Based off of what you've read, what do you think will happen next?</i></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> |

"Democracy"

by Langston Hughs

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have summarized a number of ideas valuable in understanding the need for and approaches to obtaining an increase in equity-focused education. I also reviewed American education policies and pedagogy from the beginning of NCLB to today, and provided a number of approaches to take in dismantling bias, which stems from current, traditional pedagogy as influenced by policy. Through completing this thesis, I am providing a comprehensive review of why, based on the biases within traditional education policies and approaches, teachers should take additional steps towards increasing equity in their classrooms. Teachers should question what current developments exist to guide them, and how they can begin working practically to lessen bias and increase social justice as part of their curricula.

In the first section, I review No Child Left Behind, Common Core State Standards Initiative, and Every Student Succeeds Act, and I examine each policy's purpose and contributions to pedagogy. Further, I explain concerns with these education policies as they relate to how classrooms function because of them. I specifically mention concerns regarding underrepresentation of marginalized students, institutional bias, focus on cognitive processes that are far removed from marginalized students' contexts, an overemphasis on high-stakes testing, confusion between equality and equity, and teachers' color-blindness mentalities.

In the second section, I examine different approaches to increasing equity in classrooms. I discuss the New Literacy Studies as a broad perspective to adopt in order to shift from the binary mentality mainstream society uses in its perception of literacy to a more inclusive mentality; also, in this portion of the second section, I discuss the importance of utilizing students' contextual frameworks when teaching from this perspective. Further, I explain that

teachers can work towards increasing equity in their classrooms by using the Social Justice Education framework, and I provide examples for how to do so. Lastly, I provide a number of intentional pedagogical choices and strategies that help reduce bias in the classroom in order to provide equitable learning experiences for all students.

In furthering my research, I would like to carry this thesis into two other areas of research. First, I would like to explore how knowledgeable teachers are about the topics I discussed in this thesis, especially as they relate to the need for confronting biases in public education and implementing ideas from the New Literacy Studies and Social Justice Education. Further, I would like to research whether teachers are willing to integrate the preceding concepts, and what can be done to help them make their classroom more inclusive.

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