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THEORIZING SOCIAL JUSTICE: FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE AS PRAXIS

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Abstract: The current socio-political landscape and proliferation of hate speak is fueling a growing sense of urgency to redress educational inequities and reclaim education. In this reflective article, we discuss our experiences as teacher educators in the rural Midwest who incorporate critical approaches to language and literacy into our repertoires of practice. We aim to advance the conversation beyond the notion of social justice in theory to what social justice can look like in praxis. We argue for social justice education grounded in a funds of knowledge approach to untether social justice from overly broad or narrow representations and to locate equity and justice at the core of responsive pedagogy.

The socio-political landscape in which we live is scary. Anti-immigrant nationalism and cries of fake news assail our senses and distort reality. Those of us who see our rights and freedoms slowly eroding by neo-liberal forces that systematically “curtail the will [and right] to critique” (Davies & Bansel, 2011, p. 5) are fearful. Tribalism and competing ideologies have rent the social fabric of society producing polarizing fissures, and we know the field of teacher education is not immune. Despite the significant body of research in critical fields, i.e. critical feminism, critical literacy, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory to name a few, Brass (2014) reminds us that the uptake of critical approaches has been uneven, and the field of teacher education in the U.S. remains largely conservative. Moreover, the proliferation of hate speech and misinformation, which has surfaced in P-20 classroom discourse, emboldens both teachers and students alike, fueling a growing sense of urgency to redress educational inequities and reclaim education (Bacon & Byfield, 2018).

In this reflective article, we discuss our experiences as teacher educators in the rural Midwest who incorporate critical approaches to language and literacy into our repertoires of practice. Our aim is to advance the conversation beyond the notion of social justice in theory to what social justice can look like in *praxis*, which we conceive as lived and experienced only through practice (Winchell & Kress, 2013). Specifically, we situate this reflection in our work with rural teachers and their bilingual and bidialectal students. We argue for social justice education (a) to acknowledge the social, historical, and political contexts that shape teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith, 2010); (b) to address competing ideologies and tensions in time and space; and (c) to embrace funds of knowledge (Moll & González, 1994) as a critical approach to enact social justice and enhance students’ opportunities to learn. We theorize funds of knowledge, the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills” (Moll & González, p. 443), as a means to untether social justice from overly broad or narrow representations and to locate equity and justice at the core of responsive pedagogy.

Contextualizing Social Justice in Teacher Education

Conceptualizations of social justice in teacher education encompass a range of topics from teacher beliefs and identity to democratic education and multiculturalism (Cochran-Smith, 2010). As such, the term has been overused, placing its deeper meaning in jeopardy (Sleeter, 2014). In practice, social justice education has focused on curricular approaches and isolated actions, reminiscent of a drive-by approach that often fails to bring about transformative change. Cochran Smith argues, and we agree, that a theory of social justice for teacher education is more than a method, curricular approach, or singular act; it is “multiperspectival, combining critical and democratic perspectives with commitments to anti-oppressive policies and practices” (p. 449). In other words, a theory of social justice education attends to structural inequities (i.e., poverty, racism, ableism, sexism) and relations of power,

rejecting the attribution of “problems” faced by people of color and low-income communities to personal flaws or failures. Instead, it considers the “effects of unfair policies and systems” (Sleeter, para. 3). And yet, as we have seen in our own practice, notions of difference remain rooted in deficit perspectives that position diverse students as problems, while misguided notions of social justice continue to neglect the social, historical constructions of otherness and inequity. So how can a theory of social justice education be actualized in praxis?

Competing Ideologies and Tensions

Theorizing social justice education and actualizing it in praxis can be fraught with tension. We witness these tensions when teaching and when conducting professional development for pre-and in-service teachers who work with bilingual and bidialectal students from nondominant families and communities. The region where we teach and conduct research falls under the Delta Region Authority (<http://delta.org>) and carries a special poverty designation. Agriculture, a major industry, employs a growing number of migrants, farmworkers, and immigrants who have journeyed from as far as Central America to find hearth and home in America’s Heartland. Depending on their country of origin, families speak Spanish as a heritage or second language and send their children to school where English is the language of instruction. We have found that smaller rural districts in the region tend to be culturally and linguistically homogenous and lack qualified translators much less certified ESL and bilingual teachers. Moreover, the region has a history of racial animus toward African Americans that began after Reconstruction and continues into the present (Loewen, 2005). In these spaces, students who speak English as another language or as a variation of the Standard are viewed as problems, and school report cards reveal an overrepresentation of language minority students in special education.

Although larger districts are more diverse, they retain a measure of linguistic stratification, especially for bidialectal speakers. Westward expansion brought settlers to the region who spoke a variation of Southern Midlands English (Bigham, 2010), which incorporates aspects of African American Language (AAL). Thus, both Black and white students speak a variation of Standard English. In our professional development workshops conducted in and across districts, teachers have complained that white dialectal students “can’t read,” while African American teachers voice their objections to using AAL to teach standard English. We have seen the impact of these beliefs that make common stereotypes manifest to justify the “underachievement” of nondominant students. Despite presenting evidence to the contrary, a majority of participating teachers felt that teaching contrastive analysis, hip hop, or AAL dialogue in literary works did a disservice by externalizing the “bad” language habits of “lazy” students who “don’t talk [or write] properly,” which is then traced back to parents who do not “value education.” We have also noted the privileging of white bilingual students from middle-to-upper-middle class homes over Spanish dominant bilinguals. Both phenomena are illustrative of unjust raciolinguistic ideologies that arbitrarily stigmatize language minority students (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Raciolinguistic perspectives position speaking and listening subjects as deficient language users even when engaging in standardized language practices (Flores & Rosa, 2015). As evidenced in the example above, these teachers viewed their students through what Flores and Rosa refer to as a “white gaze,” which is ideological rather than biological and contributes to a process of “social reproduction and societal stratification” (p. 152). Relatedly, in one of the rural districts where we conduct research, a newly arrived multilingual immigrant child for whom English is her third language was referred for special education services, an altogether familiar scenario. Incidentally, had she been evaluated in her native language, the child’s IQ would have ruled out special education and would have likely qualified her for gifted education if the district had a gifted program. These incidents are indicative of deeper societal issues that valorize a nationalist, assimilationist meritocracy. To this effect, Flores and Rosa (2015) challenge educators to recognize that educating language minority students is part of a profound struggle that extends beyond speaking and writing Standard English to providing tools to help them persevere and resist the inequities they face. We view resisting oppression as a fundamental precept of theorizing social justice in education and the means by which to effectuate transformative social change towards praxis.

Embracing Funds of Knowledge to Enact Social Justice in Education

Theorizing funds of knowledge entails understanding and embracing the sociohistorical and cultural backgrounds of students, families and communities. Grounded in this theory is the notion that nondominant students have lived experiences that enrich classroom ecologies.

Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, and Moll (2011) argue that funds of knowledge fosters the use of family and community resources to enhance pedagogy by incorporating knowledge, information, and forms of economic exchange into the classroom. The bridging of family and community knowledge with social and cultural capital lends a more nuanced approach to pedagogy by linking lived experience and students' social worlds with "educational achievement, occupational attainment, and civic participation" (Rios-Aguilar et al., p. 167), the essence of social justice. This critical theoretical assertion highlights the notion that knowledge is not found but constructed. Essentially, the border between knowledge and power is crossed when students' lived experiences become validated as a source of knowledge and when students are empowered to take action, impacting their lives and the lives of others across schools and communities.

Students are not passive bystanders, as they might seem in some classrooms, but active participants in a range of activities. They contribute to the economic production of households by serving as language brokers and by participating in a variety of home-based businesses and economic exchange (e.g., childcare, landscaping, tile work). We are reminded that the "totality of experiences, the cultural structuring of the households, whether related to work or play, whether they take place individually, with peers, or under the supervision of adults, helps constitute the funds of knowledge children bring to school" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 75). Encapsulating social justice education within a funds of knowledge pedagogy lends itself to revaluing the social, economic, and intellectual capital of households and communities as resources for teaching and learning.

A funds of knowledge pedagogy for social justice can redress institutional and educational inequities faced by working class and non-dominant students by fostering acceptance, respect, and inclusiveness. By its very nature, it addresses perceived barriers of community values and norms by promoting advantages rather than disadvantages and by emphasizing the value of household economies as a critical means of exchange. Berkovich (2014) critiques social justice efforts that solely focus on the academic achievements of "deprived children" (p. 288). He views this as part of a neo-liberal agenda that perpetuates the status quo. On the contrary, with its emphasis on academic achievement, educational attainment, and civic participation, a capital approach to funds of knowledge is perhaps the only means to achieve the overarching goals of a social justice education in theory and praxis.

Perspectives on Social Justice in Practice and Praxis

Our work in rural America underscores the need to create opportunities to learn and to build socially just communities. We reiterate that this is not unique to urban areas. Discrimination and bias against race, ethnicity, language, and LGBTQ students persist and thrive everywhere in the current political economy. We assert that in today's bootstrap mentality, those with privilege, including teachers, are more inclined to blame students and their families for low academic achievement without questioning and critiquing the effects of poverty and social structures that impact student performance. The time is ripe to harness the momentum of protest movements taking shape across the country. As conscientious teacher educators, we advocate for a multi-pronged approach to rethink, retheorize, and re-work social justice education.

The field of social justice education is emerging and evolving with new instantiations. It is enacted through transformative hip-hop pedagogies, youth ethnography, and spaces where Youth Participatory Action Research flourishes. However, these places and spaces are not universal, so how do we challenge and shift the status quo? In the conservative backroads of America's Heartland, we have begun by drawing on Hick's (2013) assertion that "small differences can have big consequences" (p. 263). To this end, we have engaged practicing teachers in community outreach with immigrant parents, conducted reading clinics in migrant/farmworker communities, and worked to help Spanish dominant English speakers advocate for their children (Bacon & Byfield, 2018). Each initiative has taken us a step closer towards building a more just learning environment for children and families. However, more is needed to effect, achieve, and sustain transformative social change or praxis.

To envision and enact a socially just education, we return to a funds of knowledge theoretical frame. Teacher education students enter our classrooms with assumptions and biases and their belief systems must be challenged. We have learned that activities such as privilege walks are helpful to begin interrogating bias and privilege, but often produce a backlash when performed in isolation. Such activities must be part of a coordinated, joint effort to suspend judgments and open spaces for thinking and dialog. To respond to this challenge, we look to Moll's (2014) notion of teachers as cultural protagonists who ground their pedagogy in funds of knowledge. Teachers as protagonists refrain from reductionist views to consider students as persons "who take part in a broader social life, of which the school and classroom are only one part" (Moll, p. 119). This is brought to bear by studying social life as a precursor to action and focusing on what Moll refers to as living culturally where the study of homes

and communities, related theory, trust and agency, and the development of innovative practices coalesce, thereby constituting zones of possibility for social justice education.

Concluding Thoughts

It is imperative that teachers take into account students' social worlds and cultural identities. There are numerous complexities involved in creating socially just classrooms and generating opportunities to learn. But as teachers struggle to bring theory to life in their classrooms, funds of knowledge can lay the groundwork for co-constructing social justice in practice and praxis.

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