

# Teaching for Social Justice and the Common Core

## JUSTICE-ORIENTED CURRICULUM FOR LANGUAGE ARTS AND LITERACY

*Alison G. Dover*

A justice-oriented curriculum can be an effective strategy for addressing Common Core College and Career Readiness Standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language.

Contemporary teachers are subject to a growing array of accountability mandates, resulting in increased pressure to focus narrowly on tested content and skills (Milner, 2013). For language arts and literacy teachers, this creates a paradox in which there is more time allotted for literacy instruction but teachers have less autonomy to develop and implement a curriculum that reflects their professional vision and localized assessment of students' needs (Burns, 2012). Moreover, despite the rhetoric of equity embedded in the Common Core State Standards, emphasis on standardization and high-stakes assessments can undermine teachers' efforts to center issues of social justice in their classroom (Agarwal, 2011; Alsup & Miller, 2014; Kelly & Brandes, 2008).

In recognition of the importance of ensuring that literacy educators can enact justice

within and despite accountability-driven classrooms, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE; 2012) recently adopted new standards for the initial preparation of secondary English language arts (ELA) teachers that prioritize candidates' social justice orientations and skill sets (Alsup & Miller, 2014). Specifically, Standard VI requires candidates to "demonstrate knowledge of how theories and research about social justice, diversity, equity, student identities, and schools as institutions can enhance students' opportunities to learn in English Language Arts" (NCTE, 2012, p. 2). In addition to this knowledge, candidates are expected to

plan and implement English language arts and literacy instruction that promotes social justice and critical engagement with complex issues related to maintaining a diverse, inclusive, equitable society...[and is] responsive to students' local, national and international histories, individual identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, spiritual belief, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and community environment), and languages/dialects as they affect students' opportunities to learn in ELA. (NCTE, 2012, p. 2)



Alison G. Dover is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Inquiry and Curriculum Studies at Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, USA; e-mail a-dover@neiu.edu.

For teachers and teacher educators, this revised language offers both the opportunity and the imperative to apply justice-oriented approaches. However, research suggests that even those candidates who articulate strong social justice beliefs during their pre-service coursework struggle to enact those visions when faced with restrictive mandates (Agarwal, 2011; Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2010; Gorski, 2010; Picower, 2011). The obstacles facing justice-oriented teachers are both practical (e.g., time, resources, mandates) and rhetorical, as teachers navigate what one participating teacher referred to as a “purposely-spread, common misconception that ‘teaching standards’ and ‘teaching for social justice’ are mutually exclusive.”

In this article, I interrupt the false dichotomization of academically rigorous and justice-oriented teaching by examining approaches to teaching for social justice with a standards-aligned ELA curriculum. The data presented emerged from a wider study of how secondary ELA teachers conceptualize and implement teaching for social justice in standards-based contexts (see Dover, 2013). In the sections that follow, I introduce the conceptual foundations of teaching for social justice and the overarching study. Next, I examine points of alignment between participants’ justice-oriented lessons and the four major strands of the Common Core: reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. My analysis underscores the potential of justice-oriented teaching as an academically rigorous and standards-conscious—but not necessarily standards-driven—practice. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research, with a focus on how language arts teachers and teacher educators might use these findings to inform their practice.

## Theoretical Framework

There is a growing body of scholarship examining how pre-K–12 teachers (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2010; Bender-Slack, 2010; Esposito & Swain, 2009; Kelly &

Brandes, 2008) and teacher educators strive to promote social justice through their curricular and pedagogical practices (e.g., Cochran-Smith, Gleeson, & Mitchell, 2010; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; Miller et al., 2011). These accounts draw from an array of equity-oriented conceptual frameworks, including democratic education, critical pedagogy, culturally responsive education, ethnic studies, multicultural education, and social justice education (Gorski, 2010; Grant & Agosto, 2008; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; North, 2008; Sleeter, 2015; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Although these movements foreground different political, curricular, and pedagogical priorities (see Dover, 2013, for analysis), they share an emphasis on equity of participation, representation, engagement, and outcome among diverse learners.

Contemporary accounts of teaching for social justice build on this foundation by considering how to enact justice within the context of standards-oriented, accountability-driven schooling (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Poplin & Rivera, 2005; Sleeter, 2015). Within language arts and literacy education, justice-oriented approaches also prioritize the reading of multicultural texts, cultivation of critical literacy, and examination of injustice in literature and life (Bender-Slack, 2010; Dover, 2013; Miller et al., 2011).

Other scholars have published compelling theoretical models of teaching for social justice that highlight both trends and tensions in the field (see, e.g., Grant & Agosto, 2008; North, 2008). Rather than reproduce their analysis, I will instead locate myself within the wider community of social justice educators. Specifically, I define teaching for social justice as the attempt to use one’s position in the classroom to promote social and educational reform within and despite repressive educational conditions and mandates (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Poplin & Rivera, 2005; Sleeter, 2015). Moreover, I envision teaching for social justice as comprising three primary dimensions: curriculum, pedagogy, and social action (Dover, 2013).

Justice-oriented teachers use a curriculum that reflects students’ personal and cultural identities; includes explicit instruction about oppression, prejudice, and inequity; and makes connections between curricular standards and social justice topics. Pedagogically, these teachers create a supportive classroom climate that embraces multiple perspectives, emphasizes critical thinking and inquiry, and promotes students’ academic, civic, and personal growth. Finally, they adopt an activist stance, raise students’ awareness of inequity and injustice, and

*“Teaching for social justice [is] an academically rigorous and standards-conscious—but not necessarily standards-driven—practice.”*

promote social action among students. This framework reflects the situated nature of teaching for social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Sleeter, 2015), the imperative to center classroom-level curricular and pedagogical practices, and the importance of ensuring academic rigor and equity (Poplin & Rivera, 2005).

## Methods

The data presented are drawn from a larger, multi-state study that examined how secondary ELA teachers frame the ideological, curricular, and practical aspects of teaching for social justice in standards-based contexts. At the time of data collection, I was teaching ELA at an urban high school that required strict fidelity to state curricular mandates. Our curriculum was not officially scripted, but I had to teach a predefined set of anchor texts and meet strict expectations regarding time explicitly spent on individual standards and preparation for high-stakes assessments. Anecdotally, I knew of other ELA teachers who were integrating social justice and standards, but the practice was both marginal and covert.

Thus, my research questions were twofold: I wanted to understand how ELA teachers conceptualized teaching for social justice and how they reconciled that vision with the demands of teaching amid restrictive curricular mandates. I took a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) to this research; as a descriptive and inductive method, this variation of grounded theory foregrounds both the contextual nature of social phenomenon and the subjectivity of data interpretation and analysis.

In designing the study, I sought to draw on teachers' curricular creativity and expertise, reflect the contextual nature of teaching for social justice (see Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 2004), and respond to the imperative to operationalize principles of teaching for social justice (Grant & Agosto, 2008). This emphasis on practitioner knowledge is consistent with other approaches to social justice and transformative research (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and also reflects my goal of conducting "research in partnership with people in ways that serve the community's interests (King, 1998)" (King, 1999, p. 115). By collecting, analyzing, and publicly presenting a standards-aligned, justice-oriented ELA curriculum, I was able to provide direct benefit to both study participants and wider communities of teachers.

I used my insider status and content area expertise to recruit participants via targeted and snowball

sampling at local, regional, and national organizations, conferences, and listservs, including those related to teaching in general, teaching ELA specifically, and teaching for social justice. Because one of my goals was to better understand how teachers conceptualize teaching for social justice in standards-based contexts, all teachers who responded to my posts seeking people who "teach for social justice in secondary ELA classrooms" were considered eligible for this study. I did not restrict participation on the basis of my own conception of teaching for social justice, but rather invited participants to articulate their own philosophical stance.

## Participants

Twenty-four secondary ELA teachers, representing 13 U.S. states, participated in the study. The teachers had between one and 38 years of experience, with a median of 6.5 years and a mean of 8.4 years of teaching ELA. Most participants were white (84%) and female (84%), a profile that reflects the teaching population at large (National Center for Education Information, 2011). Seventeen participants (71%) taught in urban schools, one (4%) in a suburban school, three (13%) in small towns, and three (13%) in rural schools (the percentages total 101% because of rounding). Eleven teachers (46%) taught in schools where the vast majority of students (>90%) were students of color, and seven (29%) teachers taught in predominantly white (>90%) schools.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data presented were gathered in two ways: from participants' responses to open-ended questions and from my analysis of a lesson plan that participants selected as an example of how they teach for social justice with a standards-based curriculum. Participants submitted written responses to a five-item questionnaire regarding their definition of teaching for social justice, local accountability mandates, approach to balancing teaching for social justice with those mandates, and locally specific challenges, as well as a demographic questionnaire related to their multiple social identities (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status), teaching experience, and school context.

Participants also provided and annotated an original lesson plan that illustrated their approach to teaching for social justice. I asked them to indicate why they selected that specific lesson and describe how it operationalized their understanding of teaching for social justice; some participants also wrote additional pedagogical details into the margins of their lessons.

By focusing on participants' written plans and their analysis of those plans, I was able to evaluate their priorities relative to teaching for social justice, as well as how they addressed state and federal content standards. It is important to note, however, that each participant submitted only one instructional sequence. Thus, although some of the lessons spanned multiple days, the data are nevertheless illustrative, rather than descriptive, of a justice-oriented ELA curriculum.

In keeping with the tenets of constructivist grounded theory, I first used line-by-line analysis to identify emergent categories and then a focused coding protocol (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007) to identify central and underlying themes in participants' responses to the questionnaire. I wrote reflective memos (Charmaz, 2006) examining emergent categories and trends within them. Throughout the analysis, I drew data from multiple instruments (e.g., questionnaires, lesson plans) to identify examples related to and assess the validity of each category. I reviewed the raw and coded data with a team of six justice-oriented researchers, ELA teachers, and teacher educators to evaluate the reliability of my initial codes, overarching categories, and final theoretical model.

I used lesson plan analysis protocols (Audet & Jordan, 2003) to examine how a submitted curriculum operationalized social justice and ELA topics, pedagogical strategies, and curricular standards. Grounded in document analysis methods, lesson plan analysis focuses on teachers' written, intended curriculum rather than the curriculum as it is implemented or received (see Goodlad & Su, 1992; Sowell, 2000). Although lesson plan analyses necessarily render an incomplete picture of the classroom processes that affect student learning (Garden et al., 2006; Jacobs, Martin, & Otieno, 2008), they offer unique insight into teachers' curricular intentions and approach to instructional alignment. When coding lessons, I focused on the social justice topics and Common Core State Standards that were explicitly taught during each lesson. That is, even if a teacher cited a state or Common Core standard related to revision, if the lesson did not include an instructional step or activity that engaged students in the revision process, I did not code it as addressing the revision portion of Writing Anchor Standard 5: "Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010, p. 18).

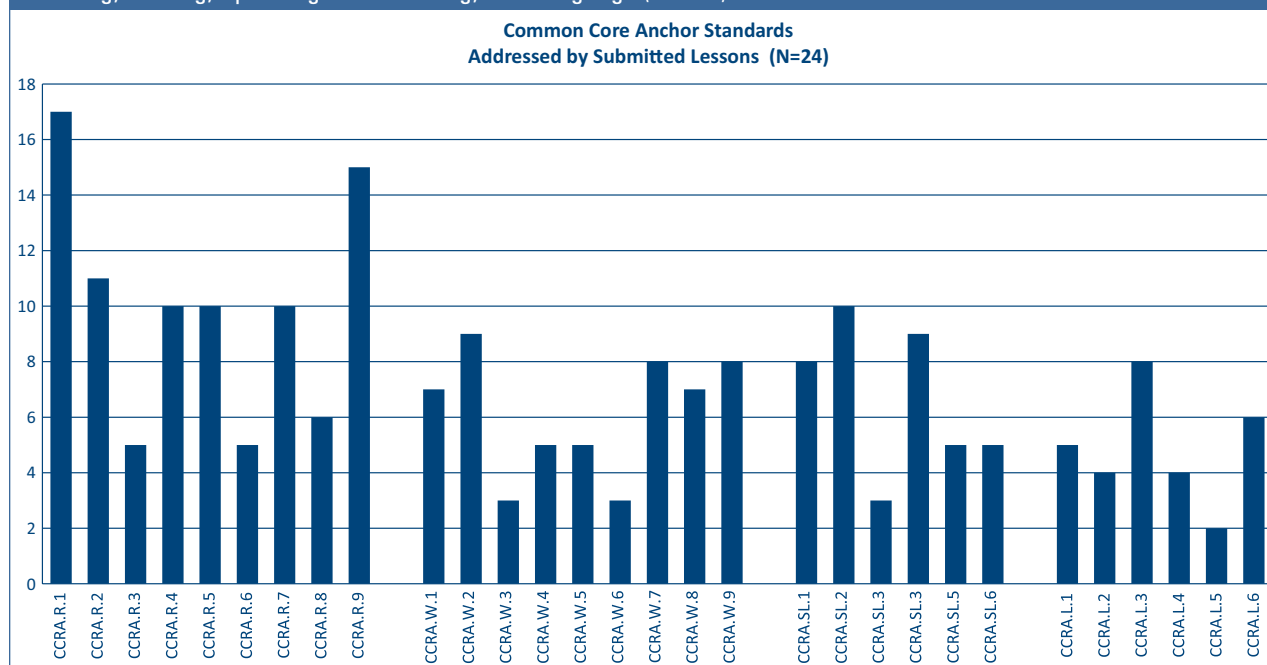
Likewise, if a lesson plan included a class discussion but not specific guidelines, criteria, or rubric for that discussion, I did not credit it as addressing Speaking and Listening Anchor Standard 1: "Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 22). Although this approach necessarily resulted in an overly conservative interpretation of submitted lessons, it also allowed me to assess alignment with the Common Core regardless of teachers' local standards mandates (as some teachers were in states that prioritized state standards over or had not yet adopted the Common Core).

## Findings

Participants were able to effectively interweave ELA content and skills with social justice themes; the submitted curriculum was standards based, academically rigorous, and broad in scope. Although each participant provided just one illustrative example, collectively the submitted curricula addressed all of the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. Overall, participants selected lessons that emphasized the reading and analysis of justice-oriented literature and informational texts; 83% of submitted lessons taught skills and content that relate to the CCR Anchor Standards for Reading. However, participants also prioritized students' creative and analytical writing, oral communication, and presentation; 75% of submitted lessons prepared students to meet CCR Anchor Standards for Writing, and 71% addressed CCR Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening. Conventions and vocabulary were less frequent emphases, although half of the submitted lessons included direct instruction related to concepts and skills addressed by the CCR Anchor Standards for Language. (See Figure 1 for a frequency distribution of the Standards addressed by submitted lessons.)

The range of social justice topics addressed by submitted lessons was equally broad: 11 submitted lessons (46%) explicitly referenced race or racism, six (25%) religion or religious oppression, five (21%) gender or sexism, four (17%) class or classism, and one (4%) sexual orientation. Twelve lesson plans (50%) referred broadly to themes of injustice or oppression, inviting students to focus on topics of

**FIGURE 1** Frequency of Alignment With Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language (N = 24)



personal relevance. Seven lesson plans (29%) emphasized historical and contemporary activists, and six (25%) explicitly engaged students in social action or activism. In the following sections, I analyze how participants addressed each of the four conceptual strands of the Common Core, using examples of individual teachers' lessons to illustrate broader trends in their approach.

## Reading

Conceptually, participants saw literature analysis as an opportunity to engage students in thinking critically about issues of equity and justice while teaching key ELA skills and content. Sharon (teacher names are pseudonyms), an Afro-Indigenous teacher teaching in an urban community of color on the West Coast, said this possibility informed her decision to become an ELA teacher in the first place:

I specifically chose to teach English because the standards are mostly skill-based rather than content-based. Students are engaged in highly analytical activities and high order critical and creative thinking on a daily basis. That kind of analysis requires specific skills that are embedded within the ELA standards (i.e., persuasive writing, character analysis, etc.), so my content area allows for much flexibility.

This flexibility was evident in the range of texts highlighted by submitted curricula, which engaged students in the analysis of a broad array of canonized and contemporary literature, informational texts, and multimedia texts. These texts included British (e.g., *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare), U.S. (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller), and “world” literature (e.g., *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe), as well as nonfiction, poetry, and multimedia texts. Of the 20 participants who submitted lessons related to literary analysis, 10 (50%) focused on canonized literature, nine (45%) poetry or lyrics, eight (40%) nonfiction or informational texts, and seven (35%) video or electronic media. Several participants submitted lessons relating to the same core texts; *To Kill a Mockingbird* ( $n = 3$ ), *Night* by Elie Wiesel ( $n = 2$ ), *The Crucible* ( $n = 2$ ), and the film *Hotel Rwanda* ( $n = 2$ ) were referenced by multiple participants.

Of the lesson plans that engaged students in literary analysis, 90% required students to use close reading, draw inferences, or cite specific textual evidence (R.1), and 80% required students to analyze similar themes across multiple texts (R.9). Additionally, 75% of participants explicitly required students to analyze the social, historical, cultural, or political context of



literature; this emphasis on reading beyond a text exceeds the scope of the CCR Anchor Standards, which prioritize students' analysis of content, structure, and argumentation within the text itself.

Angela, a white teacher teaching in a predominantly white rural community in the Northeast, submitted a unit entitled "Blacklisting, Mob Behavior and Hysteria in *The Crucible* and Post-9/11," in which students used their analysis of a canonized work of literature as a springboard to address a local, contemporary case of injustice. In the unit, students read and analyzed *The Crucible*, focusing specifically on the role of propaganda, blacklisting, and hysteria during the Salem witch trials. After completing their analysis of Act I, students read primary, photographic, and journalistic accounts of the post-9/11 experiences of Arab Americans in their local community, including the high-profile arrest of a local Sikh man.

Students were required to identify specific textual and conceptual parallels across the two contexts, cite textual evidence that supported their analysis, and examine how differences in denotative and connotative meaning can reveal journalistic bias. This strategy of reading across multiple literary and informational texts related to a specific social justice theme was shared by many participants. Other teachers submitted units in which students analyzed literary, historical, and contemporary examples of genocide; speeches made by famous activists; and justice-related themes in popular music.

### Writing

In addition to units that focused on literature analysis, participating teachers also highlighted their approach to teaching writing within a social justice curriculum. Eighteen participants (75%) submitted units that addressed one or more of the CCR Anchor Standards for Writing; of these units, nine (50%) engaged students in writing informative/explanatory texts (W.2), nine (50%) in research projects (W.7 or W.8), and eight (44%) in written, evidence-based literary analysis (W.9).

Andrew, a black teacher in an urban community of color in the Northeast, described teaching for social justice as "an inquiry driven process that promotes critical thinking and active citizenship for personal and societal change." This commitment to rigor and civic engagement informed his approach to using culturally and contextually relevant content to help students reach difficult writing standards. In the unit, students analyzed *My Adidas*, a hip-hop song by

Run DMC, before embarking on a research project related to persuasive language, consumerism, and representations of culture in popular music. At the conclusion of the unit, students translated their formal written analyses into public service announcements that demonstrated their understanding of persuasive appeals, acceptable fair-use practices, and technical aspects of writing for publication.

In addition to addressing a broad array of CCR Anchor Standards for Writing, including those related to text types and purposes (W.1 and W.2), the production and distribution of writing (W.4, W.5, and W.6), and research to build and present knowledge (W.7, W.8, and W.9), this unit also directly targeted skills and content associated with the Reading, Speaking and Listening, and Language strands. As one of only six lessons submitted (25%) that addressed all four strands of the CCR Anchor Standards, this unit was especially broad in scope; however, Andrew's integration of research, analysis, writing, and presentation was shared by multiple other participants.

Participating teachers took a broader approach to writing than is represented in the Common Core; in addition to analytical writing, participating teachers also asked students to engage in reflective writing that related their own experiences to course themes, experiment with persuasive writing, and write to raise awareness about pressing community issues. For example, Patrick, a white teacher teaching in an urban community of color in the Midwest, submitted a unit drawn from his 10th-grade curriculum. Throughout the course of the year, his students analyze injustice in a range of canonized texts, including *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* by James McBride, and *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare. However, rather than submitting a literature-based unit, Patrick highlighted a writing unit intended to help his academically diverse students grapple with abstract themes while enhancing their development as writers.

Patrick used justice-oriented children's books (purchased with a small district grant) to help students examine "sophisticated and politically charged topics in...[accessible and] uncomplicated ways." After reading and analyzing the structure and form of children's literature, his students turned to their own journal entries as inspiration for original children's stories related to activism, injustice, or inequity. Students learned techniques for writing dialogue, engaged in multiple rounds of peer revision, and used digital

FIGURE 2 Resources for Teaching Justice-Oriented Children’s Literature

The following websites are good starting points for students seeking examples of justice-oriented children’s literature:

- ADL Books Matter: The Best Kids Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice  
<http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/books-matter/#.VdlxgvlViko>
- Amelia Bloomer Project: Recommended Feminist Literature  
<http://ameliabloomer.wordpress.com/>
- CLASP: Américas Award for Children’s & Young Adult Literature  
<http://claspprograms.org/americasaward>
- Cooperative Children’s Book Center: 50 Books about Peace and Social Justice  
<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/detailListBooks.asp?idBookLists=77>
- EdChange: Best Social Justice Children’s Books  
<http://www.edchange.org/survey/EdChangePoll-ChildrensBooks.pdf>
- Jane Addams Children’s Book Awards for Peace, Social Justice, World Community and Equality:  
<http://www.janeaddamspeace.org/jacba/>
- The Pirate Tree: Social Justice and Children’s Literature  
<http://www.thepiratetree.com/>

These websites feature lesson plans and instructional resources related to the analysis of social justice themes in children’s literature:

- Children’s Literature as Tools of and for Activism: Reflections of JoLLE’s [Journal of Language & Literacy Education’s] inaugural *Activist Literacies* conference  
<http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Childrens-literature-tool-for-activism.pdf>
- Occupy Día [de los niños/libros, or Children’s Day/Book Day]: Engaging Children to Social Justice Issues  
[http://ala13.ala.org/files/ala13/SujeiLugo\\_PosterSession\\_Handout.pdf](http://ala13.ala.org/files/ala13/SujeiLugo_PosterSession_Handout.pdf)
- Teaching Tolerance: Reading for Social Justice  
<http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/reading-social-justice>
- Using Their Words: Social Justice Curriculum and Children’s Literature Reviews  
<http://www.usingtheirwords.org/>

storytelling software (Comic Life: [comicliffe.com](http://comicliffe.com)) to create, illustrate, and publish their books. The students then shared their books with local fifth graders, who provided feedback about technical, creative, and thematic aspects of the stories. (See Figure 2 for recommended resources to support students’ identification and analysis of justice-oriented children’s literature.)

### Speaking and Listening

Participants prioritized students’ ability to communicate effectively about issues of social importance, speak persuasively, and advocate for personally relevant causes. Of the 24 teachers who participated in

the study, 17 (71%) submitted units that required students to formally present their work (SL.4 and SL.5), evaluate spoken or multimedia presentations (SL.2 and SL.3), and adapt their presentations for diverse school and nonschool audiences (SL.6). These emphases aligned with those in the CCR Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening, although participants placed greater emphasis on their students’ ability to use and evaluate persuasive techniques than is represented in the CCR Standards.

Elena, a white teacher in an urban community of color in the Northeast, submitted a unit in which students “actively engage in a real-world activity that contributes to social justice in their own communities”

through the creation of a “Poet’s Café” that raises awareness about a social issue facing their local community. In this unit, students study the history of the justice-oriented Nuyorican Poets Café and analyze rhetorical, stylistic, and linguistic strategies that Nuyorican poets used to draw attention to issues of social injustice. Students then embark on a class project in which they agree on a social issue, write and revise poetry illustrating aspects of that issue, and perform their poetry for an audience of their peers. Throughout the unit, Elena highlights oral communication techniques, requiring students to consider approaches that “convey a message of power...[in] a real-world public space”; provide feedback regarding students’ rhetoric, poetic form, and performance technique; and evaluate the collective impact of their performance.

Nell, a white teacher teaching in an affluent small town in the Northeast, placed a similar emphasis on students’ ability to persuade an audience to take action regarding issues of social inequity. In her unit, entitled “Do Something,” students analyzed linguistic and rhetorical elements of speeches by Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Sojourner Truth; drew parallels between historical examples of activism and their school’s service learning requirements; and researched practical, political, and persuasive strategies for enacting social change. Students then selected and researched a local manifestation of social injustice or inequity and developed a social justice intervention that raises awareness, funds, and support for the issue of their choice. Students had the remainder of the semester to enact their social justice intervention; at the end of the semester, the students presented and evaluated the success of their intervention, focusing on the oral and written communication skills demonstrated by their projects and the longevity of their impact. In framing her unit, Nell highlighted the success of prior groups of students; in previous semesters, her students created a gay/straight alliance at their school, ran clothing drives for women’s and children’s shelters, and changed the school policy related to bullying and harassment.

### Language

Although submitted lessons placed greater emphasis overall on students’ reading, writing, and communication skills than on direct instruction related to Standard English and conventions, half of the participants submitted units that explicitly addressed content and skills found in the CCR Standards for Language. Within this category, participants prioritized students’

ability to interpret contextual and denotative meanings (L.4), analyze figurative language (L.5), demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English (L.1 and L.2), and use language effectively in diverse public and academic contexts (L.3 and L.6).

The previous vignettes highlight participants’ strategies for teaching language skills within the context of units related to literature analysis. In Patrick’s unit, for example, students were required to evaluate and demonstrate fluency in the conventions of children’s literature, including punctuation, grammar, and word choice. Likewise, Elena taught a minilesson related to the diction of power to help students unpack figurative language and nuance of meaning in poetry. This approach to teaching grammar-in-context underscores participants’ ability to balance conceptual elements of language arts and literacy instruction with Common Core emphases on conventions.

Karen, a white teacher teaching in an under-resourced vocational school in a Northeastern urban community of color, took a similar approach. She described her unit as one that uses “literature to facilitate” wider conversations regarding race, class, and inequality; in her case, *Macbeth* leads to a wider examination of pressing social issues. After teaching the play, the students evaluated how the poor physical condition of their school affected their ability to perform theater. Students completed a thorough analysis of resource shortages and physical deficiencies at their school, developed a wish list of materials that would facilitate informal theater production, created formal proposals for renovations, and wrote letters to local businesses requesting donations to support their efforts. When presenting the unit to students, Karen used the thematic focus of the unit to lend authenticity to the teaching of conventions. She emphasized students’ opportunity to “write to change [their] environment” and used minilessons to teach specific aspects of grammar and conventions relevant to students’ task.

### Discussion and Implications

The participants in this study demonstrate the potential of an authentic, ambitious, and justice-oriented approach to secondary ELA. By using social justice as a lens through which to consider canonized and contemporary texts, identify topics for research and analysis, and extend student learning beyond the classroom, participants organically addressed—and



often exceeded—the CCR Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. This refutes critics’ ongoing attempts to portray teaching for social justice as unrelated, and even contradictory, to academically rigorous content instruction (see Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Shakman, & Terrell, 2009) and underscores the efficacy of justice-oriented teaching as a strategy for teaching the critical and higher order thinking skills prioritized throughout the Common Core.

## Take Action

### STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

1. Unpack your stance. What do you mean when you say you want to teach for social justice? Many teachers find it helpful to write out their vision for their work with students. These can serve as a litmus test when you are confronted with difficult curricular, programmatic, or philosophical decisions.
2. Pay attention to your local context. What are your students’ academic strengths and needs? What inspires, fascinates, or troubles them? What types of social justice issues are hot in your school or community? What perspectives or experiences are over- or underemphasized in your existing curriculum? Answers to these questions can provide starting points for justice-oriented curriculum development.
3. Examine connections across your justice-oriented, curricular, and pedagogical goals. Ask yourself, What do you want to do? What do you have to do? How can you engage students in setting curricular priorities? Use principles of backward design to plan a curriculum that simultaneously addresses conceptual, content-specific, and justice-oriented objectives.
4. Connect with intellectual, professional, and community allies. Who are the justice workers in your school and community? What other teachers are using inquiry approaches, interrupting the status quo, or talking about justice? How can you support one another in centering justice-oriented practices, asking hard questions, ensuring rigor, and navigating contextual realities?

That is not to say that teaching for social justice in a standards-driven world is easy. Although participants in this study were all teaching in public school classrooms where they were required to meet local and national accountability mandates, they also had the autonomy to design a curriculum according to their professional interests and expertise. This is not the case for all teachers, as districts increasingly rely on a standardized curriculum narrowly tailored to high-stakes exams (Milner, 2013).

This trend is especially troubling in light of the emphasis on local control woven throughout the Standards themselves, which emphasize the opportunity “for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4). Additionally, this study relied on participants’ written curricula and self-reported descriptions of their teaching experiences. Future observational research examining participants’ classroom practices, as well as analyses of their students’ work, would provide additional insight into the relationship between a justice-oriented curriculum and literacy learning.

However, by offering models of a standards-based, justice-oriented curriculum, this study complements existing research on teaching for social justice in ELA (e.g., Alsup & Miller, 2014; Bieler, 2012), social studies (e.g., Agarwal, 2011), mathematics (e.g., Gutstein, 2003), and science (e.g., Barton, 2003). This growing body of research offers multiple curricular and pedagogical examples that teachers and teacher educators might draw on in the classroom. Teachers can use the examples included in this article to identify new strategies for use in their classrooms, advocate for the validity of justice-oriented teaching as a strategy for meeting standards, and articulate their rationale to teachers and administrators. Moreover, although the lessons included in this article are drawn from 24 different teachers, collectively they offer building blocks for a comprehensive justice-oriented language arts curriculum. A teacher might, for example, use Angela’s and Andrew’s units related to media representations of culture to frame a wider examination of how literature reflects and refracts a sociopolitical context.

Likewise, teacher educators might ask candidates to evaluate the strengths and limitations of these teachers’ approaches, identify grade-specific skills and content associated with described units, or develop an

original curriculum that reflects their own social justice frameworks (see Alsup & Miller, 2014; Bieler, 2012). Students in my writing pedagogy class, for example, analyze examples of justice-oriented, standards-aligned curricula before creating lessons that speak to their own philosophical and curricular priorities. Practices such as these offer the opportunity not only to support pre- and inservice teachers' development of a social justice orientation and skill set, as required by the NCTE standards, but also to shift the conversation about what it means to teach the Common Core.

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- ✓ Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce. (2014). *Grassroots curriculum toolkit 4.0: A critical urban praxis collection*. Chicago, IL: Author.
- ✓ Christensen, L., & Watson, D. (Eds.). (2015). *Rhythm and resistance: Teaching poetry for social justice*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- ✓ Conference on English Education Executive Committee. (2009). *Beliefs about social justice in English education*. Retrieved from [www.ncte.org/cee/positions/socialjustice](http://www.ncte.org/cee/positions/socialjustice)
- ✓ Education for Liberation Network’s EdLib Lab database: [www.edliberation.org/resources/lab](http://www.edliberation.org/resources/lab)
- ✓ Miller, S.J. (2014). Cultivating a disposition for sociospatial justice in English teacher preparation. *Teacher Education and Practice*, 27(1), 44–74.
- ✓ Richards, J.C., & Zenkov, K. (in press). *Social justice, the Common Core, and closing the instructional gap: Empowering diverse learners and their teachers*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

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