"We Have So Many Conversations About It, But What Are We Doing?": Connecting Social Justice Theory With Practice in Multilingual Education Spaces

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Abstract

Much has been written about social justice in education, but theory does not always translate to practice. Using cases from four elementary teachers, we explore how participants conceptualize and enact social justice approaches in their multilingual educational contexts. Data included interviews and document review, which were analyzed iteratively. Participant narratives show how each drew upon their unique identities and talents to enact social justice through guiding, storytelling, disrupting, and connecting. To address inequities in their contexts, teachers utilized their understanding of social justice to inform their methods and advocacy. We call for teacher preparation to develop justice-oriented practitioners by honoring diverse entry points and connecting knowledge with practice.

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Introduction

Social justice is often viewed as a guiding principle for achieving a just and compassionate society by promoting the full and equal participation of all individuals, equitable distribution of resources, and support for all people's rights (Bell, 2007). However, the definition of a *social justice educator* can be elusive, making it difficult to transfer theory to practice and consider contextual factors. This is especially true for educators in multilingual education settings, as diversity efforts are scrutinized and ideological polarization may prevent participation.

We are a student-professor researcher team at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, who recognize the urgent need for advancing social justice in schools. Enrollment of English learners has steadily increased in Midwestern states (NCES, 2024), and this population is especially vulnerable to current policies and climate that may not be welcoming to immigrant communities. By examining perceptions of social justice among in-service teachers in PK-2 multilingual settings, the research team asked, "What are approaches to being a social justice practitioner?" and "What are teachers' social justice beliefs, actions, influences, and tensions?" In this study, we examine the cases of four practicing teachers and how they carry out social justice in their real-life contexts through tangible action with their multilingual students, their schools, and their communities.

The Social Justice Educator

The meaning of "social justice" has evolved over time. In 1970, Paulo Freire advocated for education as a vehicle to empower marginalized individuals and promote social change. Freire argued for problem-posing approaches, where students become conscious of issues and engage in critical thinking and dialogue to address these issues (1970). Decades later, to prepare teachers to serve an increasingly diverse student population, social justice was conceptualized through culturally-responsive pedagogy (CRP, Ladson-Billings, 1995), contending that teachers should learn about students' diverse experiences, interests, and talents and then center these resources in their instruction. Over time, social justice was proposed as not just a topic that teachers should teach, but as a lens through which to view all aspects of education, from curriculum development to classroom management (Ayers, et al., 2009). While there is variability in definition, most frameworks for social justice education include the teachers' ability to critically analyze oppression, engage in self-reflection and cultural humility, and do something actionable (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Hackman, 2005; Kendi, 2019).

Teachers of multilingual learners (MLs), like those included in this study, have unique opportunities to enact social justice work. MLs are students who are developing proficiency in multiple languages, often referred to as English Learners. MLs make up nearly one-quarter of the U.S. K-12 student population (IES, 2025). Despite the assets of bilingualism, MLs often face academic challenges, with lower proficiency levels in reading and math compared to their monolingual peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

To respond to this need, educators enact social justice with MLs through language-focused instruction, academic support, and school-family partnerships. To honor and recognize students' bilingualism, teachers welcome diverse language practices and work to upend notions of English as one standard language (Domke & Cárdenas Curiel, 2021; Flores 2016). Promoting bilingualism can be difficult amidst pressure to develop English and in climates with English-only movements. Dual language education offers opportunities for students to learn in two languages, but even here, language-minoritized students and families face barriers to access and equity (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). Some have called for *critical consciousness,* or interrogating issues of power and inequities, to practice social justice in dual language settings (Palmer, et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Despite many ideas about social justice, there is a gap between theory and practice and not enough research has examined the unique and concrete ways in which teachers actively participate in context. This study drew upon the social change ecosystem map (Iyer, 2018) along with tenets of a theory of justice (Cochran-Smith, 2010) for a conceptual frame (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Framework for Understanding the Social Justice Educator
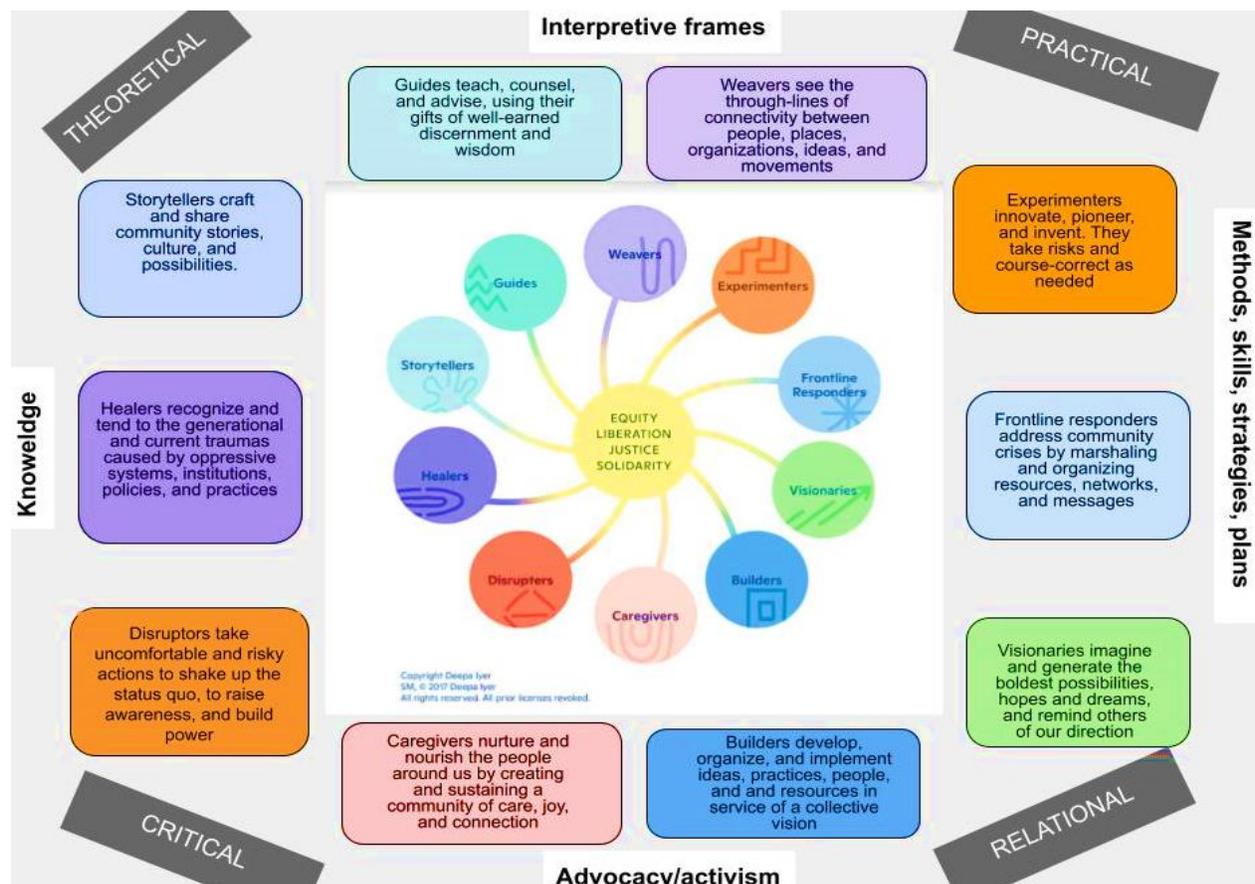
Note. (Adapted from Cochran-Smith, 2010; Iyer, 2017).

Kilmer & McLeigh (2019) apply these frameworks to explore social change across educational and community contexts, and though not specific to ML education, point to the importance of alignment of values, roles, and actions across systems and individuals.

The center of the framework uses the social change ecosystem map, a model that aligns social change values, individual roles, and the broader ecosystem (Iyer, 2017). The center identifies core values of unity and collaboration; the spokes depict 10 roles that practitioners can perform to promote social justice. The map invites personal inquiry into one's talents and goals, learning how to channel these in unique ways toward social justice pursuits. A practitioner may ask, "What are my values, how can I be aligned and in right relationship with them, what are the needs of the communities who anchor me, and what can I offer with my full energy?" (Iyer, 2020, p.2). The roles are intended to be viewed within a broader ecosystem, interacting with contextual factors.

Teaching for justice is not only what teachers *do* in their work, but also how they think about their work, interpret policy around them, and understand competing agendas (Cochran-Smith, 2010, p. 455). So, the framework includes tenets that the social justice educator might draw upon to make sense of their experience and engage. Cochran-Smith (2010) proposed that teacher practice for social justice must be theorized as an amalgam of the following elements:

- Knowledge: Teachers not only have a knowledge base but can critique the very idea of a knowledge base, what knowledge counts in school, and whose interests are served.
- Interpretive frameworks: Teachers can bring beliefs and values that consider their students' assets, multiple identities, and how they are positioned in our society.
- Teaching strategies, methods, and skills: Teachers can develop caring relationships, design instruction based on student interests and knowledge, and make equity an explicit part of the curriculum.
- Advocacy and activism: Teachers can call explicit attention to school and classroom injustices and engage students and families in their remedy. (p. 455)

The Need to Understand Social Justice Education with MLs

There is coherence among the concepts of social justice, teaching for social justice, and multicultural/multilingual education, with goals that are mutually beneficial (Cho, 2017). Research has shown how teachers enact social justice by building upon students' *funds of knowledge*, or the historically accumulated and culturally developed knowledge and skills that students bring from home and from their families into the classroom (Moll et al., 1992). This honoring of knowledge can be reciprocal, and Brantmeier (2013) encouraged pedagogy of vulnerability, for example a teacher opening up one's self in ways that are purposeful, reciprocal, and brave. These ideas have been applied in multilingual education settings. One study, conducted in a Navajo school system, examined how teacher agency and vulnerability served to advocate for more equitable assessment and local language preservation (Winstead et al., 2008). Research has also shown that reflecting

on one's own teacher identity as an ML can support understanding of languages, status, and context (Pinho & Goncalves, 2025).

Teachers of MLs build student awareness and knowledge of different named languages and their sociolinguistic and socio-political sensitivities, known as Critical Language Awareness (Clark, 1990). Research conducted on translanguaging or welcoming a student's entire linguistic repertoire and utilizing it for learning, shows how translanguaging promotes positive bilingual identities and social, political, and educational justice (Briceño & Zoeller, 2022; Lei, 2023). Despite these bodies of research, not enough is known about concrete strategies conducted in one's actual teaching context, and the contextual factors that influence approaches to social justice. Kalaja et al. (2025) pointed out that curricula provide teachers with few practical guidelines for honoring how language works, how they are developed, and how to address multilingualism as lived. So, teachers are left to their own devices to figure out how to make instruction relevant for MLs, and aspects of their teaching context inevitably play a role. A research study is needed to understand approaches to teaching for social justice and the beliefs, actions, influences, and tensions that teachers navigate to enact their approach.

Methods

This study used narrative inquiry (Wei, 2023) to understand the social justice educator in action by exploring the narratives of four elementary teachers in multilingual settings. "Narrative inquiry is described as being in the midst of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, always located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 144). Narrative inquiry served as an appropriate method because research sought to understand not only participant experiences, but experiences within the broader ecosystem of their ML teaching contexts - narrative inquiry has been used to understand educators' career path exploration and identity formation (Floyd, 2012; Tsui, 2001). Here, narrative research focused on how participants made sense of their experiences and approaches to social justice in their ML teaching contexts. Specifically, the research team asked, "What are approaches to being a social justice practitioner?" and "What are teachers' social justice beliefs, actions, influences, and tensions?"

Context, Participants, and Positionality

Bound by space and time (Merriam, 1998), research took place at a liberal arts college in the Midwest in a graduate-level teacher preparation program for language and literacy. Coursework led to an endorsement in an add-on teaching license in English as a Second Language, Bilingual Education, or Reading. Curriculum in the program focused on the state standards for teacher preparation in these areas and was undergirded by a conceptual framework of culturally and historically relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings,1995; Muhammad, 2020). Sample courses included Paradigms of ESL/Bilingual Education, which engaged them in understanding language ideologies and equitable systems, and Equitable and Antiracist Reading Pedagogies, in which they

conducted an equity audit of literacy learning at their school sites. Recruitment for the study took place following a semester-long supervised field experience. An invitation was shared by email to all eligible participants, providing a description of the study and informed written consent. Purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009) was applied to the population, selecting participants who were teachers in multilingual PK-2 settings. All were in-service teachers who held an initial teaching license and were pursuing graduate studies for an additional add-on license in ESL, Bilingual education, or Reading. Four cases were selected as exemplars who provided data to best answer research questions. Table 1 displays participant information.

Table 1

Participants

Participant	Self-identified Demographics, Pronouns	Home Language	Graduate Pathway	School District	Program Model	Position	Years Teaching Experience
Erin	White, she/her	English	ESL/Bil	Urban	Dual language	1st grade	12
Gretchen	Latina, she/her	Bilingual	ESL/Bil	Suburban	Dual language	Kindergarten	10
Hector	Latino, he/him	Spanish	ESL/Bil	Urban	Dual language	2nd grade	5
Mara	White, she/her	English	Reading	Suburban	English-medium	4K	10

This study included four participants teaching in varying regions and positions. All were pursuing graduate studies. Erin, Gretchen, and Hector participated in the ESL/Bilingual pathway and were fluent in English and Spanish. Mara was a candidate in the Reading program. Whereas Gretchen and Hector bring perspective as Latinx educators who grew up bilingually and as minoritized language speakers in the United States, Mara and Erin offer a lens of white educators, reflecting the demographic of 80% of the U.S. teaching force (Schaeffer, 2024). All teachers taught in settings with multilingual students. The population of English learners in the region had risen steadily over the prior decade, leading to increased programming and demand for teachers with ESL/Bilingual licenses. This rapid program development and teacher shortages made it difficult for school districts to properly plan for meeting the needs of MLs in equitable ways. Mara's program model was English-medium, and all other participants were in bilingual dual language program models where they utilized both Spanish and English as languages of instruction, and where the program goal for students was bilingualism and biliteracy.

Our positionalities impacted our research. We are a student-professor research team and we connected organically through our shared passion for advancing social justice work in our fields.

We are both white, female, and bilingual in English and Spanish. Author One served as a bilingual teacher and instructional coach before becoming a university professor, where she met Author Two. As an undergraduate student of Spanish language and Child/Family studies, Author Two brings an understanding of systems frameworks to social justice work. Author One was the instructor of the participants, and Author Two had no relationship with them. Together, we authors strive to support those around us in realizing their connection to social justice work and authentic engagement– work we find more critical now than ever.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources included an interview, an artifact, and a document review of a lesson provided by participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spanish or English by the primary investigator, who is also bilingual. Participants elected to carry out interviews in person or via an online platform, and all four chose to participate virtually. Interviews lasted between 45 – 60 minutes. The interview protocol elicited participants' beliefs about teaching for social justice, asking questions about enacting social justice in practice, the supports or challenges they encountered, and how their understanding has grown over time. A semi-structured format (Creswell, 2012) allowed the interviewer to follow a planned set of questions but with the flexibility to explore emerging themes that may arise. Each participant was asked to bring an artifact that reflected their definition of social justice. This physical or cultural artifact was a tool, an instrument, a work of art, etc., and served as a data source that provided a broader perspective to understanding the phenomenon (Yin, 2009). A final data source was a teaching plan provided by participants that they designed and delivered with their multilingual students.

Data was collected and coded after course completion. All sources – the interview, artifact, and document (teaching plan) – were analyzed using the same set of codes. Analysis began with a preliminary exploratory round, reading through each participant's data in its entirety to capture the essence of their responses (Saldaña, 2021). In a second round of coding, we analyzed data sources, noting examples of social justice roles as described in the conceptual framework (Guide, Disruptor, etc.) as well as examples of knowledge, interpretive frames, methods, and advocacy. Codes were also developed to note influences and tensions in engaging social justice work. An additional round of coding was conducted to further examine social justice practices, highlighting prominent ideas such as "identity" and "collaboration", and actions occurring at the classroom, school, and community levels. All data was coded by both authors; each author was the first coder for half the data and the second coder for the other half. We reviewed discrepancies in coding and reconciled differences. Following the coding, we organized the codes into a conceptual map to guide how we communicated the emerging themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

Participant narratives revealed their unique ways of conceptualizing and acting on social justice. Four teachers, described below, drew upon their identities, talents, and experiences to engage justice efforts in their multicultural contexts. While participant data revealed variety, the most

common roles included the Guide, Storyteller, Disruptor, and Weaver. To carry out these roles in their settings, teachers drew upon knowledge and interpretive frames to recognize injustices and address them through teaching strategies and broader activism.

Guides Use Their Wisdom to Teach, Counsel, and Advise

Hector, a bilingual second-grade teacher in a large urban school district, grew up in the U.S. To describe his cultural/linguistic identity, he shared, "I always forget… is it Latino or Hispanic?" Hector illustrates how he teaches, counsels, and advises, using his gifts of discernment and wisdom. Hector's approach to social justice means hearing the voices of students and families and incorporating these interests into his teaching. He shared about community circles, engaging with families, and interest inventories before planning a unit of instruction. For example, "so I asked them, I would like to know… let's do a survey. I want to know what kind of foods would you like to eat?"

Hector served as a Guide in modeling language use in his bilingual classroom. His setting utilized Spanish and English, and there were tensions around allowing divergent expressions and approximations when these strayed from formal language use (e.g. "I eat pozole because is the food from my abuela"). As a bilingual person who had lived several years in the U.S., Hector reflected on how he used languages fluidly and interchangeably, and how this was not always honored by his teachers growing up. Hector harnesses his lived experience to become a guide. He strives to provide the opposite for his students, reporting:

> I let their voice be heard. They may have different cultural contexts or expressions, like I understand that they learned it in the home. I incorporate that too because I want them to be heard. [We] need to respect that and understand where it came from – their expressions, their way of communication — that's what they're getting from their family.

Hector admitted that incorporating students' home practices and interests was not always easy. He shared how his school's emphasis was on developing foundational reading skills with extended blocks of time on phonics. The curriculum's lessons on English spelling patterns were taught out of context, and his ML students did not always understand the words' meanings or make connections to what they already knew in Spanish. Hector and his teammates attempt to navigate a curriculum that privileged traditional school knowledge but omitted cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge. He described their approach: "And so we're just thinking of, like, how to make it engaging. And relevant…we just wanted to take into account students' cultural assets."

Storytellers Share Community Stories, Culture, and Possibilities

Gretchen is a kindergarten teacher with 10 years of teaching experience. As a Latinx and White teacher, with family from Palestine and lived experience in Spain, Gretchen's narrative revealed a nuanced understanding of race, culture, and language, which informed her conception of a social justice educator. To learn about her students, she asked:

> Who are they? Where are they from? What are their races, their ethnicities, their languages, and then how do those factors of their identity affect them day-to-day and their learning? And then, for me as a teacher ... how can I teach them in the most effective way? Where I am uplifting and celebrating them?

Viewed through an interpretive framework (Cochran-Smith, 2010), Gretchen's questions reflected her understanding that all students have life histories structured by race, class, culture, and other aspects of privilege and oppression. She also used this lens to serve as a Storyteller, writing children's books that reflect her students' lived experiences and offer relevant messages, reporting,

> I do write children's books…[I write] about the question of worries at home and whether it's a child that's a refugee child or a child that just has a lot of mobility in their life, maybe from apartment to apartment or has moved abroad like my daughters from Spain. To hear the message of this book, it really explores where is our home, and I think it really guides children to see that our home is really in an emotionally safe place, whether that's our parents, or a parent or close friends or those teachers, your school community.

Her example illustrates how she develops a just curriculum that is generative and responsive, not prescriptive. Gretchen also pairs her books with breathing techniques for conflict-resolution "when kids weren't ready to talk through an issue or they were so escalated." Coupled with regulation strategies, Gretchen's storytelling taught kindergarten students interactional patterns of how to negotiate, discuss, and engage democratically with peers.

Gretchen appreciated her school's emphasis on knowledge-building of social justice through conversation. However, without tangible methods, strategies, or acts of activism, Gretchen yearned for practicality:

> We have so many conversations about racism and you know, and antiracism later, but like, what are, what are we doing? So I feel like there's a lot of talk about it. But when it comes to action that feels like it's lacking a bit.

Like Hector, Gretchen faced challenges in acting on her knowledge of justice due to constraints in curriculum and schedule. Gretchen seemed to generate her own ideas, explaining:

> I don't think antiracist teaching is yet an integrated part into how we teach or into curriculum. So I felt like I had to make special times and moments. And I have to be very… very, like, *al propósito...* intentional, I had to be very intentional. Sometimes overriding other things, like a little bit less phonics time, because you know what? They were getting beautiful access to literacy skills in a different context anyways.

Gretchen and Hector navigated the tensions between a prescribed curriculum and teaching for social justice. Whereas Hector wondered how he could modify the curriculum to make it culturally relevant, Gretchen replaced it with resources (stories) that she designed, crafting and sharing community stories, cultures, histories, and possibilities to uplift diverse student experiences.

Disruptors Challenge the Status Quo, Raise Awareness, and Build Power

Mara is an early childhood teacher in a 4-year-old kindergarten setting, where many of her students were MLs. An educator with eight years of experience, Mara needed to adapt her pedagogy over time to meet changes in the adopted pedagogy around her. She shared how the recent push for skills-based literacy instruction that emphasized instruction of letters and sounds had replaced time spent on reading comprehension and discussion. Like Hector and Gretchen, this presented a challenge for her to teach for social justice. Throughout these reform initiatives, Mara shared that she commits to an approach she calls "humanizing and holistic," taking her steps to extend the curriculum and her literacy goals for her students, sharing:

> I placed a high value on literacy. I placed a high value on being able to understand and communicate…I do think that in order to be literate you have to actually be able to read the world around you…You need to be able to teach them how to do that because they are expected to be able to do that.

In this example, Mara reveals how she utilized an interpretive frame to develop her understanding of what literacy means. Beyond the prescribed curriculum, she identified her broader goal to "read the world around you", moving beyond technical skills and extending literacy to understanding oneself and the social world (Freire & Slover, 1983). Mara sought to foster a lens of criticality, something she saw as especially important for her ML students. She also demonstrated criticality in her sense-making by critiquing the goals of the prescribed curriculum and interrogating what knowledge counts.

As a Disruptor, Mara recognized power imbalances in the education system and sought to enact change for her students:

> Yes, everybody was talking about it but nobody was doing anything about it. And that's kind of how I felt about [our school district] was we talked a lot about what we should be doing, but to actually get some practice happening in the classroom was…stalled out.

Mara's observation echoed comments from other participants and critiques about social justice work remaining theoretical and not actionable (Chang-Bacon, 2022). Nevertheless, Mara recognized injustices and acted. For example, she noticed how school transportation routes were not always accessible, creating a barrier for MLs and other marginalized communities from participating in her program. She shared:

> I've been more, like, I say brave. I just feel like I finally found my voice to say, 'hey, it seems really odd that we only have these classes that look like this [White demographic]. But that's not what the community looks like. Like, talk me through that understanding.'

Here, Mara illustrated a justice-oriented view of citizenship. Her advocacy involved inquiry, asking leaders to "talk her through" the policy, illustrating how disrupting can engage dialogue for

conflict-resolution. Mara also took action even when she was unsure, and unafraid of making mistakes:

> Because I often find myself only speaking if I feel like I have a viable solution, which I'm challenging myself to not do that. Like, taking like a low risk action is better than no action at all. So even if you fail, at least you've tried something and then you can kind of learn from that.

Though she did not discuss the role of her knowledge in her advocacy, Mara's awareness of the transportation problem showed her understanding of society's distribution of resources and its impact on marginalized groups. Mara seemed to utilize this knowledge in conjunction with actionable practice.

Weavers Draw Connections Between People, Ideas, and Movements

As a Weaver, Erin was able to make links across settings and concepts that may not be intuitive to all. Erin served as a first-grade teacher in a dual language program, where she brought 12 years of teaching experience and an understanding of social justice education that she explained has evolved over time. Like Hector, she viewed students' languages as a key factor in their identity and in the social dynamics of her classroom. She described the conversations with her teacher team:

> We're talking about antiracist teaching, but also like understanding like, the power structures, like, or just linguistic hierarchy within a school, or within a society and to elevate marginalized languages and things like that…there's so much about how we elevate Spanish and make sure that Spanish is, is being you know, that we're not just letting English kind of take over the room.

In this quote, Erin demonstrated her understanding of language and power in society, using the term "linguistic hierarchy" to describe how English is privileged, even in her bilingual setting.

Erin illustrated how teachers question what knowledge counts, what language counts, whose interests are served, and whose perspectives are and are not included. As a Weaver, she served as a natural bridge builder working across divisions and linking herself, her students, and the broader system. For Erin, continuous reflection and introspection supported her developing understanding of social justice:

> So that's the first part is like this understanding of oneself and a commitment to that to continuously unpacking and growing and being better, I guess, in your understanding of your place in the power structure of society and within structures that are, like, inherently racist.

Whereas other participants focused on curriculum modification or extension, Erin centered her everyday actions, sharing how acts of justice often involved supporting new teacher teammates with understanding the unit plan, managing classroom assessments, and planning parent-teacher

conferences. She pointed out that students are watching and learning, explaining, "what matters more is not just the content, but also through the way that you model your interactions with people in the classroom."

Data also revealed that participants drew upon influences - their lived experiences, commitment to students, relationships, and ideals – to act. Their approaches, displayed in Table 2, integrated different lenses to conceptualize and enact social justice work.

Table 2

Integration of Lenses to Enact Social Justice

Roles	Beliefs (theoretical lenses)	Actions (practical lenses)	Influences (relational lenses)	Tensions (critical lenses)
Guides use their wisdom to teach, counsel, and advise	Family knowledge of language and literacy matter; student interests must be heard and harnessed.	Openly honors students' ways of knowing and ways of using language.	Naturally shares their own influences and experiences (e.g. using language) as a means to motivating and teaching students.	Prescribed curriculum does not always lend itself to student-centered approaches.
Storytellers share community stories, cultures, and possibilities	Values expression of diverse stories, histories, and experiences.	Uses story to uplift marginalized experiences and learn democratic engagement.	Harnesses their own lived experiences and knowledge of societal power imbalances and communicates through story.	School-wide equity efforts may not give opportunity for innovation and creativity.
Disruptors challenge the status quo, raise awareness, and build power	Has awareness of systemic inequities and views education as means to address them.	Notices issues at classroom or school-wide level and responds through questioning or dialogue.	Inspired by the possibility of a more just future and how even small actions can affect change.	May feel frustration on focus on theory over practice; may feel unsure how to move forward and take action.
Weavers draw connections between people, places, ideas, and movements	Understands the relationship between power, language, culture, instruction, positionality, and identity.	Modifies classroom policy and practice (e.g. language use), and models justice through her own interactions.	Influenced by continued self-awareness and by relationships.	May confront barriers of power structures or limited power of teachers to influence broader change.

Acts of social justice were frequently met with tensions. Participants shared that mandated curriculum and language policy presented challenges for how they carried out social justice, specifically in finding time to engage in social justice while also covering extensive curriculum requirements. Though participants shared about social justice being a focus at their schools, they experienced a disconnect between conversations about social justice and taking action; they desired more tangible practices. It is important to note that this study did not examine the depth of participant knowledge about social justice or where their knowledge came from. Nevertheless, data showed that participants drew upon their understandings of social justice – often complex understandings – to notice and question inequitable practices.

Discussion

Findings from this study link social justice theory to practice and illustrate four approaches to teaching for social justice in multilingual contexts. Congruent with the definition of justice posed by Cochran-Smith (2010), teacher practice reflected their theories of social justice, or the knowledge and beliefs they held about what social justice means. They acted on these beliefs through methods, strategies, and acts of advocacy.

Participants show how social justice theory and practice are mutually sustaining. An understanding of justice supports one's ability to engage in action, and one's practice helps shape their robust understanding. Findings echo the call that we must not reduce social justice work to simple strategies, methods, and tactics without also questioning the traditional knowledge base of schooling and critiquing its limitations (Cochran-Smith, 2010). This study was limited by its small sample size. Further, the study only included teachers' narratives of their social justice action and did not include observable behaviors or practices. Future research could explore the role of social justice teacher preparation, considering the connection between their knowledge development and transfer to practice in context.

We support colleagues Perugini & Wagner in their claim that "social justice education involves every aspect of education, including but not limited to, access, curriculum development, program offerings, hiring decisions and instructional choices" (2022, p. 45). And, with this expansive scope, teachers need concrete examples. This study's findings corroborate prior research showing how advancing social justice entails acknowledging linguistic repertoires –including uniqueness, diversity, and creativity – of students and teachers (Kalaja et al., 2025).

Participants illuminated personalized routes to engage in justice efforts in multilingual contexts. We call practitioners in any setting to consider their social change journey. To do so, practitioners may reflect on the guiding questions below (Iyer, 2018):

- What role(s) feel natural for me? What are my talents, skills, and ways of working?
- Who are the people I surround myself with and what roles do they play? How can they hold me accountable in a compassionate way? How can I widen this community?

- How do I move through different roles without feeling like I have to pick just one to be effective?
- How can I stretch myself moving forward, and why? What are the injustices that keep me up at night, outrage me, and push me to act? How can I adapt from my own mistakes?

To be relevant and actionable, social justice teacher preparation must consider the unique ecosystem of the school climate and how to leverage supports and navigate tensions within it. Contextualized, actionable justice efforts are especially critical in multilingual settings, where students' languages and cultures can be unintentionally overlooked. One promising approach to teacher preparation is fostering critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) through a cyclical process of reflection and action (praxis). Teachers can be set up to analyze inequities in their context and take concrete steps to address the problem. Following their action, recursive cycles of reflection support them in working towards social change. This problem-posing can take advantage of diverse talents among staff and also support the development of both knowledge about justice and the practice of justice, taking care not to neglect one or the other. Further, a contextualized approach serves to address the many factors in a school ecosystem that contribute to oppression and liberation.

Conclusion

This study's findings illustrate robust and inclusive approaches to social justice and show that knowledge and action can be symbiotic. Though efforts took place in multilingual education settings, the Guide, the Storyteller, the Disruptor, and the Weaver are approaches for practitioners in any school setting. In a time where diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are under attack, we call for the field to focus on developing practitioners who can enact social justice in their unique ways. We argue that such preparation must include knowledge-building in conjunction with actionable practice in context. In the words of Iyer, "Safe communities start with each of us" (2013). For this, an expansive view of the social justice educator is needed.

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