In Community with Students as Changemakers

Robyn Orozco

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In Community with Students as Changemakers
A Reflection of Creating Authenticity in an Ever-Changing Classroom

Robyn Orozco

Claremont Graduate University’s Teacher Education Program
Teaching & Learning Process for Equity and Social Justice

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July 11, 2021
To my family and friends

who have supported and guided me

through my journey to becoming a

Social Justice Educator

Aimee Noelle Orozco
Arturo Arteaga
Cedric Gomez-Orozco
Crystal Star Orozco
Gavin Salvador Orozco
Genesis Grace Orozco
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Tasha Duff
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Abstract

The purpose of reflection is to analyze experiences in order to raise questions, decide what works best, and be in a constant state of learning and growing as a person. This ethnography is a written account of my journey as a first year teacher and social justice educator in which I share stories, artifacts, and ongoing reflection of myself and my teaching practice. Through this reflection, I explore my background and positionality, connections made with students, and sensemaking of various practices in my classroom. In addition, I describe our shared class experience of examining social issues and the power of youth activism. During my first year of teaching, I have explored various methods of engaging students in meaningful content, rigorous curriculum, and socio-emotional learning to create a well-rounded classroom experience. Student's socio-emotional needs often outweigh their academic needs, especially in an unprecedented year of virtual learning due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. My students and I have worked in-community to nurture an authentic and reflective environment in our classroom. In sharing our power and tools, we leaned into our funds of knowledge, cultural backgrounds, and unique interests to enhance and elevate our curriculum in a meaningful way. My reflection surrounds the pathways I have taken to be able to provide individualized and personal attention to each student in order to support all learners in my classroom.
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**Introduction: Inclusivity, Equality, and Love**

I am a mother, first generation daughter of Mexican immigrants, and a social justice educator who strives to make inclusivity, equity, and love the foundation of my teaching philosophy. I am passionate about building positive relationships and being an ally to my students. I also believe that it is essential for me to balance the rigor of our content standards with scaffolds and meaningful engagement in order to guide my students toward success. My students are encouraged to be critically conscious through topical research and civil discussions, using these practices to meaningfully and respectfully challenge the status quo. Through Claremont Graduate University, I have earned a Single-Subject Teaching Credential in English and a Master of Arts in Education. My experience as a first year teacher and graduate student in the midst of a global pandemic has been unique. This ethnography follows my journey to becoming an educator, my mission to integrate social justice into my teaching pedagogy, and my experience as a student teacher, including various interactions with students, colleagues, mentors, and households.

"We have to be our best selves. We need to reflect harder on the conscious and unconscious ways we teach." (Keene et al., 2015) In reflecting on my journey, I am constantly able to ignite the flame that gives me courage to be a social justice educator. In order to be effective and authentic as a social justice educator, I am encouraged to seek feedback, be reflective, and truly know myself. This corresponds with Critical Social Justice Competency 1.1(CSJ 1.1). This is the approach I took in relaying these stories and artifacts which ultimately create the journey that the following pages hold.

Social issues around the country, on top of the global pandemic, and the curriculum that I chose to incorporate into my classroom led to situations in which I was faced with having or
facilitating difficult conversations with students. Although these conversations made me nervous about bringing up certain topics that I know will cause a rift, or make students uncomfortable, I always knew that I had the support of my marigold—my amazing mentor teacher and fellow social justice educator, Kat Everdeen. “Marigolds exist in our schools […]—encouraging, supporting and nurturing growing teachers on their way to maturity.” (Gonzalez, 2019) Jennifer Gonzalez asserts that a marigold effect is synonymous to companion planting in the gardening world. As a marigold gives of itself to help its neighboring plants flourish, a caring and enthusiastic colleague or mentor can elevate a teacher’s level of satisfaction as an educator (Gonzalez, 2019). Kat is my marigold, she is supportive of my teaching philosophy and encourages me to facilitate these conversations with students in order to grow their self awareness and awareness of others. Through this ethnography, I am able to reflect on these conversations, including how they were organically integrated into our class curriculum and the support I received from my mentor teacher.

It was paramount for me to detail this journey, not only as a means for reflection, but also to check in with myself to ensure that I am remaining true to my values of care, compassion, and leading with love. The classroom environment or ‘vibe’, as my students would call it, was our top priority as a class (CSJ 4.2). In this ethnography, I attempt to properly portray the beautiful online community that my students created in which they felt safe with one another, even through our transition from online to in-person learning. An extension of this classroom ecology is our focus on socio-emotional attention and support. As a new teacher, the best advice I have been given is to prioritize self love, student love, and teacher love. I want my students to know that I love them and feel that they are in a safe and caring environment when they are in my class. I also want my students to know that I have high expectations of them because of that
love. “I’m gonna love you, but I’m gonna love you up!” (Emdin, 2021) This is what makes me the social justice educator that I am today. I work in-community with my students to create a foundation of love, responsiveness, and reflection in order to emphasize kids over content in all facets of our classroom.
Part A: Journey to Teaching

Positionality

I am culturally of Hispanic descent and consider myself Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicana. I am bilingual in Spanish and English and I was brought up to speak standard English. I grew up in a lower-middle class family with a working father and a stay at home mom. Neither of my parents attended college and only my mother graduated from a United States high school. My parents are both immigrants from Mexico and this plays an important part in my identity.

I was part of the G.A.T.E. program in elementary school and attended Oxford Academy in Anaheim, a college preparatory junior high and high school. I am able-bodied and I have 4 siblings with disabilities and learning delays. My positionality as a first generation Mexican American, light skinned, lower-middle class, able-bodied woman puts me in a position of privilege with experience in marginalized groups. In teaching, it is my mission to disrupt a value-based education system to encourage students to honor their positionalities and cultures while actively identifying and rejecting the idea of socially constructed knowledge. (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p.15)
Effective Teaching

When I was young, I wanted to be a teacher but I did not have a good idea of what grades or areas I wanted to focus on. In high school, I formed close relationships with my English and Choir teachers, which helped me hone in on the subjects and grade levels I was most interested in. During this time, my family was providing foster care and adopted my five youngest siblings, which guided my decision to pursue a career in child development and social work.

Unfortunately, through my own and my family’s schooling, I met many teachers who did not value their students and did not teach with social justice. At Oxford Academy, preference was often given to the school’s large white student body as they were more likely to graduate and enter four-year universities while the rich diversity of the small population of students of color was hardly recognized. This led to a we-they mentality between white students and students of different cultural backgrounds, which was especially harmful given that students of color made up only 5-10% of each class. As Valenzuela describes, the we-they mentality perpetuates the feeling of “otherness”. (Valenzuela, 1999, p.17-18) This creates an almost tangible line that students of color are not able to cross without the explicit intervention of an empathetic teacher who values and enacts social justice. This pushed me to pursue a career in teaching, to be able to make a positive impact on students like myself and my loved ones who rely on school to support and validate them. I believe that a teacher should celebrate the different cultures and

Figure #3: Anaheim, 2019
Orozco Family in front of our childhood home
personalities of their students. Acknowledging them as fellow society members and allowing them autonomy in the classroom are essential to promoting a growth mindset that they will carry with them throughout their academic career and beyond.

**Why English?**

My goal in this program is to be an impactful high school English teacher by encouraging and facilitating meaningful interactions and active growth in creativity and critical thinking through literature. I would like to encourage my students to be students of the world and literature, in all forms, is a purposeful way to explore that. High school, for me, was the most emotional and pivotal time in my academic journey. I experienced rejection, otherness, discrimination, as well as meaningful support, inspiration, and genuine care from my teachers and peers throughout this time. I believe it is essential to recognize and confront these feelings with each of my students to connect them to the class content and relate them to their personal lives. My 9th grade English teacher was the first teacher I encountered that treated me like an equal contributor to the classroom. He acknowledged our diversity and incorporated it into our lessons which not only enhanced our understanding of the material but allowed us to take those lessons outside the classroom. I aspire to create a similarly nurturing classroom ecology to create opportunities for my students to learn and grow together. I believe that I can be most effective in a multicultural, urban school setting, where students can see themselves in me and my actions and realize their potential to do great things.
Teaching with Social Justice

I am currently exploring the role that social justice will play in my classroom. Sensoy & DiAngelo will help to guide me through identifying and rejecting microaggressions and internalized oppression (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p.72-73). By first acknowledging my positionality and identifying my own implicit biases, I will be able to open myself up to accept guidance and promote social justice as a teacher. Constant reflection will also be important for myself and my students. I would like to invite texts and other media from different cultures to allow my students to be exposed to and learn from throughout the year. It is also my intention to invite students to share their own writing and media to broaden the scope of our classroom to include personal experiences.

Strengths

My greatest strength in an academic environment is my genuine love of learning. This is something that I work to nurture in my son and would like to nurture in my students. I would like to connect with them in order to identify their likes, interests, and personal connections in order to apply it to our everyday learning. I would also like to impress on them a sense of ownership in the class and daily lessons to strengthen their interest in the material. I have experience in
socio-emotional, human, and family development from my undergraduate background and would love the opportunity to impart that on my students. Meeting the students where they are is crucial to me in building rapport and two-way communication with them.

**Needs**

My needs in the classroom lie in my ability to learn and adapt alongside my students to create a cohesive and nurturing classroom. I would also need time to acclimate myself to the socio-cultural needs of my students so that I can best guide them through quality and meaningful instruction. Building that rapport, although detailed as part of a strength above, involves the establishment of trust, respect, and being intentional with interactions with students. I want to make sure that I have open lines of communication with their families, insight into their likes and interests, and approach getting to know them with an optimistic attitude. This will be a learning process for me as a new teacher, however, I am confident that I will be able to form significant connections with my students with the support of my mentor teacher, advisors, and cohort.

**Implicit and Explicit Biases**

There is immediate personal work to be done to move past my implicit biases. Personal experience guides the way that I relate to people as will the student’s personal experience affect the way they relate to me. I would like to explore the idea of ‘doing school’ as a learning experience for myself and my students. In my own schooling, I was an example of a student
who knew what to do to make sure that I was always seen doing what I was supposed to, even if I was not fully present in lessons and studying. Since much of my undergrad education was online only, I lost that visual connection with my teacher and thus had to adapt to an individual manner of achieving success in school, which was foreign to me at the time. My implicit biases are centered around my idea of being a scholar. I have realized that I am quick to judge people based on their speech, use of grammar, and spelling. I also have unfair assumptions about people who do not dress ‘properly’ such as wearing pajamas to the store, wearing flip flops to class, or wearing clothing that is unnecessarily small or large. It is my job to confront these biases if I want to be an open and engaging educator and citizen of the world. By diminishing the input of others based on their difference in informal, formal speech and vernacular, I am losing immeasurable opportunities to experience diversity through meaningful conversation and input. In judging a person by their clothing, I am undermining their contribution based on something that has no bearing on their ability to affect and influence my life in positive ways. My explicit biases are mainly founded in making assumptions about a dominant group’s thoughts and feelings regarding a marginalized group. I have realized that I tend to favor marginalized groups more because I have a sense of belonging with them and I have had poor interactions with members of dominant groups. This is something that I am truly working through, meaning that I understand that I cannot justify making those assumptions over single incidents or ‘gut-feelings’ that I have based on what has happened to me in the past.

Ensure Efficacy as a Critical Social Justice Educator

Although I believe myself to be a champion for the underdog in global situations, it is important for me to recognize that not all groups, or all people in certain groups, feel or act in the
same generic way. The classroom, especially one that I would like to be active in promoting social justice, is not a place for my feelings of rejection or judgment that I may have experienced in the past. It is up to me to reflect and adjust as I grow as a student of social justice and a mentor to teens as a teacher in order to give my students a safe place where they are free to explore and face their own biases and learn from each other's experiences.

First Year Teaching Goals

In my first year of teaching, I would like to continue to examine my own biases and identify what influences them and why I hold on to them, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is important to me to be able to learn from my colleagues, peers, students, and their families. Smith, Fisher, and Frey compare a traditional and restorative approach to schooling. A foundation of rapport and a trusting relationship with students coupled with meaningful instruction are described as the foundation for effective class management (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015, p.3). I want to create a classroom ecology that allows space for opinions, personal experiences, different cultures, and different languages. The Circle will be very present in my class in order to meet these goals and establish who I am as an educator. The reason I decided to apply for Claremont Graduate University was the experience that I had sitting in on a class and participating in the Circle. I felt heard, cared for, and secure that whatever I said would be accepted with love and understanding. That is the environment that I will strive to create in my classroom. As the image above suggests, students will be able to share their true colors with one
another to inspire and influence through their diversity and personal funds of knowledge being acknowledged and celebrated.

**Possible Challenges**

My challenges would include being able to accept feedback in a positive way, responding positively to constructive criticism, understanding the point of view of others, and not taking offense to comments or suggestions that will help me grow into a stronger educator and social justice champion. My main role in my classroom will be as a social justice educator which includes adapting to different classes, students, colleagues, and general school environments. I may also face challenges from deeply rooted structures of subtractive schooling depending on my district, school, administration, and colleagues. I will need to be a strong partner in learning to my students and encourage their ownership of space in their classrooms and community. Hammond highlights the importance of being a warm demander to motivate a student with self doubts and an outsider mindset to that of an independent learner (Hammond, 2015, p.110).

**Resources to Promote Social Justice**

My resources are my ethnography, social justice education, peer-reviewed books and media, and having open and honest conversations with colleagues who share my goals and philosophy of teaching. I will surround myself with like-minded educators, activists, and community members to create a network for support, exchanging ideas, and promoting social
justice in the classroom. Gonzalez suggests finding the marigolds, a metaphor for a strong support system of colleagues, in a school community as soon as possible to enhance your growth and effectiveness as a new educator (Gonzalez, 2017, p.1-2). Being socially and globally aware as well as staying current with news and trends will serve to keep me informed of issues affecting my students and allow me to prepare to appropriately meet their needs.

Assess Meeting Goals

My progress can be assessed by my own reflections, peer interactions, and, especially, the involvement of my students. It would be my goal to regularly assess my effectiveness as an instructor through measurements of student’s progress. Marzano explains that measurable scores can offer insight on a student’s performance and growth throughout the year (Marzano, 2017, p.26). By offering a measurement perspective, I can use personal conversations, discussions, and observations to determine my student’s growth in the material and highlight areas that I need to give more attention to or change up the way I am presenting content to better serve them. This would also allow me to provide feedback and give students the opportunity to change and grow through their assignments, rather than simply doing it for a grade. I would like to incorporate a variety of ways for my students to provide feedback, such as through open discussions, polls, and anonymous surveys throughout the semester. I would ask for their input in classroom organization and remain flexible to meet them where they are to promote
supportive and growth based learning. I would always provide rationale for requesting feedback and completing assessments to maintain a high level of trust and community with my students. Keeping those lines of communication open between myself and my students will be essential in ensuring that I am aware of the atmosphere in the classroom and can build upon that to continue to level up in on-going years of teaching.
Part B: Students Learn, Grow, and Thrive in a Virtual Setting

The Language Arts 10 Honors virtual classroom houses a diverse group of culturally vocal and socially aware students. My students are in 10th grade, multicultural, and have taken advanced English classes in their previous school years. Many students are involved in extracurricular activities, such as a variety of sports, ASB, school newspaper, charitable clubs, and special interest clubs. They seem to be happy and eager to share their cultural experiences as well as information about their lives outside of school. The classroom environment, although online, focuses on cultural appreciation through acknowledging and celebrating important dates, holidays, and personal achievements.

A majority of students are reluctant to use their cameras and not every student has reliable internet and device access. Many are shy, camera shy, or otherwise unsure of how to properly participate in online learning due to the lack of opportunities to be social and become comfortable with their classmates. This, however, does not hinder their willingness to participate and share their funds of knowledge. Students in this class are diverse in their religious backgrounds, political views and their views on social issues. They are quick to speak their minds and engage in civil discussions, which makes class time enjoyable and enriching.

Classroom Ecology

I have committed to being an authentic and empathetic presence in my students' lives. I make a pointed effort to share my social identity, positionality, and culture influences with

Figure #11: 2020, screenshot from Zoom class meeting

Miss Orozco
students frequently and build opportunities for students to do the same. It is important to me to celebrate students' interests and perspectives as well as encourage students to celebrate each other's interests, thinking, and perspectives. Students were invited to create norms as a class and I also offered a set of norms that I follow and try to live by as a teacher. This allowed students to see that I am participating in the same work that I am asking them to do as well as offer insight on my intentions when I enter the virtual classroom.

Each class begins with motivational openers and ends with optimistic closures that allow students to be open, creative, insightful, and positive. “This process [nurtures] a great sense of ownership and community in [my] classroom.” (Hammond, 2015, p.146) I believe that positive learning relies heavily on trust which is nurtured by solid relationships- a student’s trust in me, in the material, in their peers, and in the education system. In order for any learning to happen, students and educators must establish a relationship based in trust and authenticity. In getting to know my students, sharing interests, showing them who I am, and being honest about my thoughts and intentions, I am able to establish and solidify my relationship with them and continually prove that I have their growth in mind over the course of our time together. I believe that community can be built in different settings, including when we are not in the same room. It is my daily goal to organize the virtual space by encouraging friendly and engaging interaction through low stakes, high interest get-to-know you strategies. Being in quarantine has shown me that strong friendships, alliances, and relationships are built through consistent and meaningful
communication and care, regardless of distance. I strive for my classroom to be a place where all feel valued and students are asked to participate to the best of their abilities. In facilitating this, I am able to create diverse opportunities for students to engage with myself and their peers in order for them to learn about and from one another. Although virtual, the classroom is welcoming, inviting, and inclusive.

Case Study: Amelia Mignonette Thermopolis Renaldi aka “Mia”

Mia has a bubbly personality that other students are drawn to. Her demeanor at school is very active, supportive of others, and overall happy to be in class. Mia shared with me that she is an outgoing person but her personal life can sometimes cause her to miss out on experiences that she wished she could be a part of. Mia is an only child and her parents work long hours outside of the home. She suffers from personal health issues that often prevent her from coming to class, being fully present when she does come, and causing her to have to leave early. Mia is comfortable speaking as well as listening to opposing views. She is quick to volunteer or facilitate discussions and is able to engage respectfully in civil discussions. Mia has excelled in Language Arts prior to this year and benefits from additional support and challenging material. She is vocal about her stances on a variety of social issues that we have discussed so far, especially regarding the 2020 presidential election. Mia is extremely proud of her Mexican and Puerto Rican culture. She is a practicing Christian and has been happy to make connections.
between what we are learning and her religious beliefs. She is very respectful of all beliefs and seems to genuinely care for all views. She shows creativity in writing as well as risk taking skills. She relates content to personal life and ideals. Mia’s academic development is typical. She has personal health issues that would classify her as atypical in that regard. Her emotional maturity is atypical as it is apparent to me that she takes on more responsibility at home than a typical teenager.

**Mia: Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity**

Mia is closest to her church friends who she sees on Mondays for service and study. She spends her free time talking to her long-distance boyfriend on various social media outlets. Mia lives by Cleveland National Forest in a mostly white neighborhood where she does not experience much diversity. Even before the pandemic, she would rarely leave the house because there was nothing to do in the community and she found it difficult to connect with her neighbors. Mia also experiences a myriad of hindering health issues that prevent her from being as active in her community as she would like. She battles with Alpha Gall syndrome and lost her gallbladder and appendix in December 2019. She also struggles with anemia, oral allergy syndrome, and depression.

Mia’s father is a truck driver and is often gone for weeks to months on deliveries. Her mother works at El Pollo Loco and she loves getting to try out new menu items when her mother comes home with treats from work. Mia’s parents believe education is the most important thing a child is responsible for. Her mother skipped a grade to get ahead in school even though English was her second language. The uncles that she is close with are, in Mia’s opinion, very smart, achieved high SAT scores, and are a lot to live up to. Mia puts that pressure on herself,
even though her mother reminds her often that she is too hard on herself. She shares that she is grateful that her parents have been so patient with learning throughout her life.

**Mia: Academic Achievement**

Mia is a high achieving student in all facets of her education. She is an English Only learner. Her classroom contributions are consistently well reasoned and offer genuine thought and insight. Although she does very well independently, Mia shines in group work and class discussions. She is able to transition from one topic to the next with ease and facilitates discussions without a second thought. Mia attempts to have her camera on whenever possible, though she sometimes feels sick and is unable to. She participates in the openers and closers in class and will offer follow up questions to her peer’s responses. Mia is very sweet and excels in writing as well as reading comprehension.

**Mia: Experiences, Interests & Developmental Considerations**

Mia is interested in religion because she feels that finding religion has transformed her life. She has a career goal to become a theologian and write her ‘testimony’. Mia shared that she has started and stopped the process of writing her testimony multiple times since converting to Christianity at 12 years old. Mia also plans on graduating from high school early- at 16 years old in Summer 2021. She has dreams of moving to South Africa, through a study abroad program at Azusa Pacific University, as well as starting her own clothing company. She is an avid reader who focuses on educating herself on business, stocks, and political science. Mia shares that she would consider a career in politics as mayor or governor at a later time in her life.
Because of her innate motivation, Mia experiences stress from the different directions that she feels she is being pulled. She currently has a $50,000 education scholarship which involves weekly grade checks. This motivates her to stay on top of her classes and maintain her grade point average to continue to qualify for this and other scholarships that she is involved with. Mia’s self-taught business education has been the inspiration for applying for scholarships and taking as many classes as she can to alleviate any financial burden that her future education may create as she does not plan on taking out any student loans.

Despite being focused on her education and financial stability, Mia finds time to enjoy small pleasures in life such as her love for animals, spending time outside and in nature, as well as exercising for her P.E. class and her own mental and physical well-being. Mia’s long-distance boyfriend, Michael, is one of the most important people in her life. He takes time to help her with finals and other school responsibilities by providing honest feedback and being a virtual cheerleader. Mia also spends as much time as she can with her mother and enjoys using FaceTime to nurture her relationships with her uncles and other family members that she is not able to see because of the pandemic.

Mia is a visual learner. She appreciates being able to see examples and having explicit expectations for school work. Mia attributes this to her health issues which sometimes hinder her ability to take in verbal information. She is also most comfortable when teachers have their cameras on in the virtual classroom. Not only does this help with her ability to take in information, but it also gives her a sense that there is someone with her in the home, other than her cat, Fat Louie, and dog, Maurice. She appreciates being able to see and hear other people since she spends much of her time alone. “According to sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis, belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling “at home”.” (Gonzales, 2016, p.61) Spending so
much of her time at home without social interaction, Mia continues to suffer through bouts of depression, further amplified by the pandemic and inability to go back to school. Mia also relayed that, although she tries to prioritize her mental health, cyberbullying is something that she experiences and is sometimes uncomfortable in certain breakout rooms or in certain classes.

**Mia: Funds of Knowledge**

Mia is a devout Christian and wears her religion on her sleeve. She was diagnosed with depression at 12-years-old and found hope and joy through her religious journey. She has always been fascinated by religions as different people in her family have different religious beliefs. Mia’s mother immigrated from Mexico when she was a child and her father was born in NY to parents who migrated from Puerto Rico. She is very proud of her various cultures. Mia speaks English, minimal conversational Spanish, and ASL. She also enjoys the differences in Spanish dialect depending on the region and nationality of the people she is conversing with, i.e. Puerto Rican Spanish vs. Mexican Spanish. We spoke in depth about code-switching which explains “how our relationships with others are so deeply internalized that we shift effortlessly back and forth between them.” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p.95) Mia is interested in exploring this further as she feels her multicultural background gives her insight into how code switching integrates into our daily lives.

Mia credits her diverse background for her family’s zest for life. Every moment is an opportunity for celebration and they do not hesitate to go all out in showing support and joy for one another. Mia has a fantastic mix of traditional celebrations such as the Mexican Quinceanera and Cinco de Mayo, Puerto Rican born celebrations such as Summer Festival, Tropical Thanksgiving, and Reyes Magos. The party does not stop there as Mia’s family also
celebrates half birthdays, family achievements, pet birthdays, and jamming out with Puerto Rican instruments such as the congos, drums, as well as the Mexican guitar.

Mia and her family have had some struggles due to prejudice and racism, mainly because she feels her appearance is ambiguous. She also, however, recognizes that she holds privilege in different ways through this ambiguity. She shares that a grandfather is African and a grandmother is from Europe, along with her Puerto Rican and Mexican backgrounds. Mia made sure to note that the darkest days for her family have come during the oppression and fear-mongering of the Trump administration. Mia describes herself as a Conservative Democrat. She goes on to explain that this means she is a Christian, feminist, pro-life, black lives matter advocate.

Mia: Interview Protocols

Mia agreed to participate as a focus student in late October 2020. Prior to this, I had taken time to study and take notes on all students in the classroom as I was just getting to know them. Mia stood out to me because of her bubbly personality and willingness to participate. She wrote an exit ticket that stood out to me, speaking candidly about her home situation and feeling alone and anxious. I was able to schedule a check-in with her- my intention was to ensure her safety and offer tools to support her mental health. Once we spoke, it was clear to me that I could learn so much from her experience as a student and learner. I reached out to her via the Remind app following our conversation to explain my intentions for asking her to be my focus student. She agreed and actively checked in with me throughout the semester to see if there was anything she could do to help me, which was so sweet and humbling for me. We met for a few informal interviews in December to discuss specific areas of focus, however, our conversations
became more than an interview. We could start with a question and build off of that for the duration of our meetings. I also appreciate that these conversations “[provided] opportunities for [Mia] to talk about [herself] and gave her a sense that she was truly welcome and valuable to the class. (Marzano, 2017, p.74) Mia is truly a pleasure to work with and it has been a great joy to be able to get to know her so personally this semester.

Mia: Reflection + Action Plan

The classroom environment, although virtual, has been nurtured by our classroom community to be inclusive and respectful. This has been especially important because of the content we have been interacting with- social issues and citizen youth activism. I believe that this helped Mia open up and voice her stress honestly during our conversations. I am excited to continue to build a relationship with her in order to learn more about her and support her throughout the next semester, and possibly in future years. I feel that the way we conducted our interviews/meetings were respectful of Mia’s socio-emotional needs and related to her personally, rather than conducting a formal question-answer interview. Mia was able to engage with me in a safe and honest manner. I would love to brainstorm future student engagement with Mia about what she sees as meaningful and non-meaningful from a student’s point of view. I believe this would allow me to “[create] a channel for building relationships with [my] students” by engaging with students to build off of their interests throughout the year. (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015, p. 65) I would also like to give Mia the opportunity to interview me, in any manner she prefers. I was able to relate to and expand on conversation when it was appropriate, however, Mia has expressed interest in learning about my academic experience as well. I believe
this collaboration would be beneficial and fulfilling for both of us throughout the rest of the school year.
Part C: Making Sense of an Unprecedented School Year

In this section, I spend time examining aspects of my journey as a student teacher as they relate to social issues and subtractive schooling. The school culture was a little different because of the added stress of virtual learning, and our nation was, and still is, in turmoil following the murders of people of color by members of the police force. Because of this, many of my students had spent the entire summer learning about social issues and looking for ways to be socially active. In my class, I strove to bring social issues to light and examine them through a student lens.

I also paid close attention to my students' socio-emotional needs which are affected by current events, various social issues, and dealing with living through a global pandemic. As in Part A, I shared my personal background, experiences, and beliefs in order to show empathy, love, and community to my students.

In my tenth-grade Language Arts Honors class, which included my focus student, Mia, we established an authentic space in the classroom where my students' needs and wants were the focus of our day-to-day interactions. Students engaged in daily Writer’s Notebooks as a form of reflection, responding to the extent they chose, in any form of expression. This allowed students to be as creative as they wanted to be and as open as they were comfortable being. As the school year progressed, students became more honest, open, and insightful in their responses which translated to them being just as expressive during our class sessions. Our daily check-ins gave students a platform to name their state of mind or emotions as they entered the classroom, offering an authentic space for them to vent and share. Oftentimes, the responses that I received from the Morning Check-in would direct our class time together, demonstrating to students that they, and their feelings and state of mind, came before content. Students found a place in the
classroom where they could be honest and cared for, while engaging in material that was relevant to them and their lives.

**Creating Authenticity in a Virtual Classroom**

An unprecedented school year — that’s what everyone has been calling the 2020-2021 virtual classroom experience. I began this school year with the warning to expect the unexpected, however, as a first year teacher, everything was new and unexpected for me. The only classroom that I knew was a virtual one and much of my time preparing for class was focused on how to make that virtual classroom a safe, authentic, and inclusive space for all of my students.

To start, students had ten minutes from the start of the class period to log in to the Zoom meeting. This was to allow time for students to get a stretch break in between classes and handle any connectivity issues before the official start of class. As I waited for my students to arrive in the Zoom room, I played music from a student-curated playlist with songs ranging from top pop songs to anime theme songs to 80’s ballads. On my shared screen, I displayed our Welcome Screen which featured a daily ‘Spotlight’. This included information about a changemaker or notable historical figure relative to the day, month, or content. This could be Anna May Wong, considered the first Chinese American movie star and a bisexual icon during Women’s History Month, or Lorraine Hansbury, the first African American author to have a play performed on Broadway during our reading of her novel *A Raisin in the Sun*. The screen included a QR code linked with further information about our spotlight. Students were also invited to contribute to the Welcome Screen with any announcements that they felt would benefit students in their class.
We often included invitations to “Vibe Check”, a student-run, open-to-all club that met weekly on Zoom to check in with one another, hang out in break out rooms, and participate in virtual yoga or meditation. Throughout the school year, students came to anticipate the Welcome Screen as well as notice when it would be formatted differently or include new items. When we were in a virtual classroom, students would post their opinions on the information displayed in the chat and converse before the class session began. During our in-person learning, students were able to share verbally with the people around them. Seeing them showing each other new information about a Spotlight, school information, or talking about songs that came up on the class playlist was a highlight of my time with them.

The template of the above image was used throughout the school year. The information displayed would be updated daily and often included a video that could be shared as students entered class. Students would be able to access the QR codes to engage in enrichment and complete the morning check-in. Spotlights would be updated daily based on the time or year or
our content. School and class announcements also made their way on to our welcome screen as needed (ex: On the day this welcome screen was displayed, we were continuing group work from the previous class session. It was important for me to know who was absent in the previous class session in order to appropriately group and acclimate those students to our activity).

Our Morning Check-in was linked on the welcome screen as well as available on their class canvas page. I requested that this be completed during the 10 minute grace period at the beginning of class. It included questions about how students were feeling coming into class, playlist suggestions, shoutouts to peers, reminders of materials needed for the day, and a reminder to take breaks for their mental and physical health. Students were very open in their Morning Check-ins, sharing personal details from their lives outside of school, adding to our class playlist, and giving shoutouts to one another. During that time, I would call out the shoutouts, privately chat with students who expressed news or worries in the check-in, and adjust to my classroom vibe based on their responses. I feel that this enhanced our virtual time together by allowing me to personally connect with each student and maintain a routine that became second-nature to them as the year moved forward.
The above figure is a sample of responses from 10th grade Language Arts Honors Morning Check-ins during January 2021. As students entered the classroom, I would be able to engage with them verbally regarding the general responses to the morning check-in and announce shout-outs. Shout-outs would be read as they were written and the person giving the shoutout would not be revealed unless they specifically requested it. I would also give my own teacher shout-outs for news they shared in their check-in (ex: getting their braces off, getting a new pet, or a birthday in their family). In this sample, 50% of students noted that they were sleepy, which was a constant throughout the virtual school year. On days where the sleepy
students had a majority in the check-in, we would switch up our routine to incorporate an opening activity that encouraged us to move around or be alert in order to prepare for the class session. Students who expressed that they were feeling frustrated, sad, pressured, or worried, would receive a personal message in the chat from me, acknowledging their feelings and offering personal support. Students often let me know that they used the check-in as a venting method and felt better after writing or talking out their feelings.

**Citizen Youth**

Although I was not placed at my student teaching assignment until a month after the school year began, I was excited to hit the ground running as soon as I was able to. I completely took over two 10th grade Language Arts Honors classes on my first day, a week into their Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum (ERWC) Citizen Youth unit. This unit discussed youth activism: what it means, the impact youth have on society, and how students can get involved in activism. Bill Bigelow states that “getting our students outside the classroom” is essential in centering “our teaching around the places we live.” (34)

In our class, we engaged in this by inviting students to share their own experiences on campus which related to the social issues that we were discussing in class. We were also able to connect our campus to our discussions on being an upstander rather than a bystander through our study of *Night* by Elie Weisel and *Maus I* by Art Speigelman. On our campus, there was a club that had created a display of posters detailing genocides over the past 100 years and planted flags to represent lives lost. Students were able to walk through this display and read, not only about the
Holocaust, but about genocides happening all around the world. This in-person display invited students to explore genocide more deeply and elevated their discussions as our unit progressed.

In regard to social issues that we discussed, students began sharing what they have posted on their social media accounts. Updating their bios on Instagram to include their pronouns, social movements that they support, and petitions that they believed in. Although the school year has ended, students have reached out to me on Remind App to share updates as well, the most recent being a Supreme Court verdict that was in favor of a student defending her free speech- a case that we discussed at length during the school year. These lasting values that students have maintained have been a source of great joy for me as an educator.

**Reflecting on Current Events**

The Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol occurred on Wednesday, January 6, 2021, while my students and I were on our winter break from school. We returned to our online classroom the following Monday with our minds and hearts heavy from a distressing week of developing news stories, arrests, presidential statements, and so much more. I presented my students with an open-ended journal reflection to offer a space to independently explore their feelings following the attack. Rhonda Magee says “we need more than a passing in looking at ourselves and our communities.” I hold this to be true in every class period as we take time to journal and reflect on various topical prompts. In order to encourage students to honestly reflect, I chose to offer an individual reflection without a whole class discussion following the writing. My classroom is divided on their political beliefs and I wanted to create a space in which everyone could be open without feeling targeted. Students had a choice of whether to respond directly to the attack or respond to generalized questions about the use of power and basic freedoms. Following our
reflection, we were able to have a short discussion for anyone who wanted to share a line they wrote or a feeling they had regarding what was witnessed at the Capitol the previous week. During this discussion, many students were candid about their emotions about the insurrection, ranging from confused, disheartened, afraid, indifferent, frustrated, and angry. As part of our reflection, I wanted to give students an opportunity to choose how they spent our class time. Students were offered a choice of four directions they could go for the rest of the class period: class discussion of current events, open room to speak and decompress from current events, peer breakout room to work on their Article of the Week assignment, and the final option was to work independently on their Article of the Week assignment. I felt that these options were appropriate for all students including students who were feeling heightened emotions from the insurrection, those who preferred not to speak about it, and students who were not affected either way.

![Writer's Notebook Prompts](image)
Following this class period, my mentor teacher received an email from a parent of two students in my class, twins Jane and Alec Volturi. The email was in response to what she heard during our reflection and the discussion that followed. The Volturi twin’s parent’s email noted that she does not agree with what we are teaching in our classroom, including our Citizen Youth unit, and specifically asked “what happened to the classics?”

I’m so sorry, but I sit next to my son and listen to all your Student Teacher Lessons. I have been patient the first semester with all her liberal views. I am just not very sure how BLM and the recent riots at the Capitol have anything to do with Language Arts?

I’m sorry, here are my views - EVERYONE needs to obey the laws. Black, White doesn’t matter. I don’t think my children should be fed or forced to take a side here or be fed more ideas than the ones already seen on the media. We teach ideals in our home. Even the books being read are social issues. What happened to the classics?

I’m so sorry, life is too short to be throwing the bad stuff into our kids lives over and over again. Isn’t being isolated and not having a normal school year enough??

I’m so sorry for this email. I’m not upset, just extremely frustrated. And I know for a fact I’m not the only mom and my kids are not the only kids tired of this format in the class.

I hope you have a great day.

Figure #19: Email from parent: Screenshot of an email that includes a parent’s issue with our reflection following the Insurrection of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, our ERWC Citizen Youth unit, and our class Social Issues Book Club.
By “classics” this parent was referring to what is traditionally taught in high school, a white-dominated canon of literature which has failed to include Black Indigenous people of color (BIPOC). I believe this is a valid question as it was also my expectation when I was considering becoming an English teacher. I assumed the curriculum was set by the school or the district. I was not familiar with the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) units which prepare students for college or trade by making strong connections between text and society. As a student teacher, I was able to move away from relying on texts that were typically used in an English class and were often divisive, racist, and polarizing, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee which normalizes racism and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald which glamorizes violence and rape.

By the end of our first semester together, we had already explored youth activism, social issues and movements, and made connections to current social issues during our reading of *A Raisin in the Sun*. My goals include exploring how deviating from the classics creates a more robust and authentic experience in the class.

Following receiving this parent email, my mentor teacher and I reached out to our school Principal to seek guidance on how to respond. With our Principal’s support, we crafted a response which was sent as an email from my mentor teacher. We included specific examples of how our curriculum meets content standards and how it can be transferred outside of the classroom. We invited a further conversation on the issues raised as well. The parent did not follow up after that email.

Another interesting aspect of this was that I actually had two of this parent’s students in my class—twins in the same class period. Alec was very interested in our content and seemed to enjoy the class. Jane also seemed to enjoy the class but was resistant to social issues that were
racially charged. As Kimberly Nao shared in their study of yoga as a social issue practice, not every student will relate to every teaching practice or content that is presented in class. (215-216) This is something that resonated with me when considering how two students of similar backgrounds responded to these units. It was interesting to see how their perspectives were influenced by their parent’s views and how they grew as global citizens throughout the rest of the school year.

Throughout this program, we have discussed the idea and practice of disrupting texts. I believe that teaching the classics in a new light would give students exposure to these important texts and allow us to dissect them in a way that their parents may not have considered. In my class, we also do weekly letters to households and I would be able to pose questions for students to engage with those at home who may have read these books during their high school years. Another idea that I plan to put into practice in the coming school year is to invite students to engage in a project in which they themselves come up with ways to disrupt texts they may have read in previous years. The process of researching and reading will give students freedom to dive further into their texts than they were able to when they were reading them as a requirement of a class.

Although disrupting texts is not common practice in classrooms, I would like students to have the opportunity to read and discuss texts in a new light, using their social justice lenses to identify stories that are not being told and shine a light on the impact their absence has on these texts. An activity that I would also love to incorporate into this reflection on texts would be Opportunity Talk as described by Mica Pollack. Coming together as a school or community, including families and households, in our classroom could create a network of contributors to discuss and create opportunities for students to demonstrate their expertise and talents in
innovative ways. (Pollack, 2) I would love to connect with households to add an extra layer of support for my students in their work as social justice advocates.

A Revolution in the Classroom

Amen Rahh muses that “one of the most important things you can do for a school is to revolutionize its culture” (p 109, 2021). This is an assertion that I have reflected on as I attempted to make sense of significant areas of my teaching this past year. What I have come to realize is that this statement does not mean that we are meant to take on the daunting task of revolutionizing the culture of an entire school, community, or district. The revolution of our culture can start with a single conversation that blossoms between students who are making a connection to their own backgrounds and experiences. Our study of social issues elevated our conversations both inside and beyond our classroom. This shows me that my impact as an educator is guided by my students working together as a community to elevate our social impact.

The global pandemic cannot be ignored nor overstated in my experience as a student teacher. Every unit, lesson, activity, spotlight, reading, interaction was created or engaged in with a cloud of the pandemic hanging over it. My greatest feat, and what makes me the most proud of the work that I have done this past year, is that my students and I were about to persevere through a tumultuous school year. Through these routines and intellectual practices, we grew as a community to begin a small revolution in our classroom that will endure. Together, we cared for one another’s socio-emotional health, academic achievement, and global citizenship to find a true silver lining to our circumstances.
Conclusion: In Community with Students as Change Makers

Through thorough and consistent reflection, I have taken daily steps toward becoming a social justice educator and I am proud of my journey so far. I have kept the CSJ competencies at the forefront of my teaching pedagogy and maintained an asset-based outlook throughout my first year of teaching. The start of my journey was based on a background of working with children and teens in a classroom or foster care environment. That experience made me feel that my calling was to be a social worker, however, I was dissuaded by people who knew me best. Their reasoning was that I would take every child’s story home with me and it would have a detrimental affect on my mental health. Although my loved ones had the best intentions, I still had a fire in my belly that told me that I was meant to be a helper, a nurturer, a supporter of others. This led me to my pursuit of a career in education, in which I would be able to make lasting and authentic connections with students while sharing my love of learning.

As an educator, I have found that I am constantly thinking about my students, how they are doing, and if I am meeting them where they need me to be. This is especially true for students who have shared personal stories with me. CSJ 1.1 resonates with me because I need to make sure that I am being the best educator I can be, while still meeting the socio-emotional and cultural needs of my students. In order to do that, I need to remain aware of myself, be prepared to see things from different perspectives, and be an authentic and effective educator. Although this is no small feat, I believe this year has presented me with daily opportunities to be an educator that embodies these traits.

My next steps as an educator are to continue to enact critical social justice in my classroom, create opportunities for students to engage in critical social justice, and maintain a positive and authentic environment for my students to learn, grow, and thrive in. My goals as an
educator include continuing to pursue higher education for myself. This includes being an active participant of professional development in my new school as well as volunteering and attending workshops and conferences that will elevate my teaching practice and enhance my students experience overall. I also strive to give of myself as a mentor to future students and educators. My mentor, Kat Everdeen, is an inspiration to me as a new teacher. She is responsive, reflective, and reliable. Not only does she support me in my endeavors, but she challenges me to push my limits, shed my inhibitions, and be my complete self in the classroom. This is the caliber of mentorship that I will strive to be— a true marigold on campus who shares her passion for social justice and community with others.

To my fellow and future educators

Do what you can with the time you have, your best will always be enough. We take care of ourselves, take care of others, AND take care of business! We can take time to reflect and recharge, all while doing the ESSENTIAL work of becoming the best social justice educators we can be.
References


