

New Directions in Teaching English

*Reimagining Teaching,
Teacher Education,
and Research*

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Chapter Eight

Learning from Equity Audits

Powerful Social Justice in English Education for the Twenty-First Century

sj Miller

This chapter prompts the field of English education to consider what preservice teachers can learn from using equity audits in their field placements to assess the absence and/or inclusion of social justice. This discussion also highlights what preservice teachers can come to understand and embody, or how their dispositions can be cultivated by equity audit findings. One key question guides this chapter: How can assignments with socially just foci cultivate critical preservice English teachers for *social justice* in the twenty-first century?

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Miller and Kirkland (2010) provide a working definition of *social justice*, which suggests that when conducting or enacting social justice work and in order for it to be sustained, reflection, change, and participation are essential.

Each student in our classrooms is entitled to the same opportunities of academic achievement regardless of background or acquired privilege. . . . Educators must teach about injustice and discrimination in all forms with regard to: race, ethnicity, language, gender, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, disability (author added), national origin, spiritual belief, weight (height and/or size), sexual orientation, socioeconomic circumstance, environment, ecology, culture, and the treatment of animals. (pp. xx–xxi)

Social justice cannot be examined without understanding social injustice. Social injustice is marked by how a student experiences pain or a microaggression, which is “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostility, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. 3) and that are typically categorized by social, emotional, physical, or psychological violations.

Social justice and injustice are situated in particular local histories as well as within the inhabitants who dwell in a locale. These remnants leave (in)visible scars, or what I refer to as a geo-history, that are woven into educational geographies that cannot be separated from their social precursors and are deeply entrenched in cultural and ideological policies. Since social justice and injustice are geographically co-produced by its inhabitants, sustained by policy and behavior, and even co-opted into discourses, understanding and embodying social justice can have endless possibilities.

Bringing social justice work into English classrooms and schools at large can disrupt and interrupt practices that reproduce social, cultural, moral, economic, gendered, intellectual, and physical injustices. By teaching preservice English students how to unpack the history of a place, they can become spatially agentive, or able to enact change in a place.

An equity audit assignment can teach them how to shift social justice work into “spatial praxis” (Soja, 2010, p. 169), or learning from and then moving embodied knowledge from one space to another. Combined, these two significant and powerful learning experiences can cultivate a social justice consciousness.

English education, as an activist branch in education, has a great responsibility to not only prepare preservice teachers for the classroom, but also to provide them with an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992) that demonstrates a genuine attention to the well-being of their students and how they experience the schooling process, which is often fraught with social injustices. Adopting a disposition for social justice can interrupt how unchallenged geo-histories reproduce and sustain ideologies that reinforce inequitable schooling practices, yet also how to reimagine and re-embody dominant narratives.

METHODS FOR CULTIVATING SOCIAL JUSTICE DISPOSITIONS

There are four developmental stages that help to organize the varying levels of awareness students bring to coursework in English education with regard to social justice (Miller, 2010): critical reflection; acceptance; respect; and affirmation, solidarity, and critique. It is highly likely that students come to

coursework and programs at varying levels in this developmental model, as well as experience a continuum of understanding related to social justice.

This model accounts for these differences and suggests that educators assess student understanding and experience related to social justice in order to scaffold activities and assignments that are developmentally, socially, and politically relevant to their learning experiences. Therefore, the model works best when approached as nonlinear because people are likely to move back and forth between stages.

Related to these overarching stages is a performative model called the “6 re-s,” which consists of reflection, reconsideration, refusal, reconceptualization, rejuvenation, and reengagement (Miller & Kirkland, 2010). Drawing on this process, preservice teachers develop skills whereby they move from a potentially destabilizing moment into a restabilizing stance and articulate a response to the best of their abilities. Such movement is a strategy to preserve and enhance social justice and other kinds of teaching in the classroom.

For this model to be beneficial to students, instructors and their students select activities based on student need(s) and where to begin the work. In fact, the developmental identity model for social justice can be individualized based on a student’s awareness of social justice. As we work within this model, the curriculum we teach and how we construct our lessons will support and facilitate the cognitive, emotional, and corporeal growth of our students.

THE CONTEXT: PREPARING PRESERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This brief discussion about cultivating social justice dispositions comes out of a larger two-year study that examines how preservice English teachers come to understand their dispositions for socio-spatial justice and their role as agents for social change.

The study is organized around three layers that move from the university classroom into secondary practice: 1) teaching preservice English teachers about socio-spatial justice and injustice; 2) preservice English teachers conducting research about geo-histories and equities/inequities in a school; and 3) preservice English teachers making meaning of their dispositions for socio-spatial justice.

Each of these layers provide windows for seeing how our field can play with how spatiality, social justice, and student experience can inform how to edit or revise particular dominant narratives that have shaped and informed, and that even “represent” student identities.

This research also has several specific aims. First it seeks to understand the initial, emerging, and exiting inner filters, inclinations, and contexts that

impact the understanding and embodiment related to social justice that pre-service students bring to a master of arts in teaching English (MATE). Next it aims to build on initial inclinations and filters as a way to scaffold learning about social justice within a developmental framework, while exploring what a disposition toward socio-spatial justice means to the individual.

Lastly, a purposeful aim of this study is to try to avoid indoctrination. Social justice, in that light, although foundational to each student's projects, was supported through their own interpretations, with only minimal researcher input that entailed clarifying questions about what a social justice/injustice was and how it was experienced in relation to reading and topics in the course Critical Pedagogy in English Education, as well as what they observed or experienced in out-of-classroom contexts.

Critical Reflection: *Tapping In*

As mentioned previously, assessing where students are in their awareness of social justice can benefit all stakeholders. Because students bring with them layered histories of past schooling experience related to social justice and injustice, readings, questions, discussions, assessments, and activities would be designed based around the initial assessment to support students in exploring their past experiences and how their current beliefs related to schooling were informed by their prior experiences.

A goal of these critical reflective histories was to help them understand and observe the ways in which schooling practices shape, inform, and cast their identities as people and later, as teachers, while simultaneously providing a space for them to make sense on their own about the importance of taking a stand for social justice in their schools and in the teaching profession writ large.

Prior to asking students to take on a major assignment for the class, the first third of the semester was dedicated to self-reflection on issues related to social justice and injustice in school. In order to assess their inner filters regarding their trajectories around social justice, students were asked to define social justice and injustice related to schools.

They were also asked to reflect and describe any time in their pre-K through university experience in which they recalled a teacher or professor make a stand for a social justice or enact an injustice in the classroom, the hallway, the lunchroom, or in the larger school or community.

From here, they were asked to consider a time when they experienced a social justice or injustice enacted on them in school, on a peer, on a group of students, on a teacher or any other school personnel, or through a policy or lack of a policy. Students also participated in The Level Playing Field activity that is designed to help students reflect on how their sense of privilege

(related to ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, ability, age, gender, national origin, language) or lack thereof manifests in the classroom.

As students moved their bodies away from a center line by responding to questions, they visually and spatially observed how different/alike they are from their peers. Students also participated in a whole-group analysis of who has power and privilege institutionally over others in which they were able to spatially see how certain groups in society make and sustain decisions that often disempower and deny access for those who have less power and cultural capital.

Through participation in class activities, personal reflections, readings, and lots of dialogue, students began to develop a burgeoning awareness about the role that social injustice and justice play in school.

Acceptance: Preservice English Teachers Conducting Research— Moving toward Respect

Based on what I learned from student reflections about their inner filters and inclinations, by scrutinizing their writing and comparing it to the frameworks for this study, the activities and major assignments that were scaffolded using the “6 re-s” were done either individually or collaboratively, which was gently encouraged by researcher input. During each class, students participated in a social justice-related activity (Miller & Kirkland, 2010).

The purpose of these activities could be to experience and embody in first space (real or actual space) how their inner filters and inclinations bump up in various contexts when asked a potentially sensitive question while teaching. When doing these specific activities initially, students were shown how the “6-re-s” model worked through the model of fourth space (Miller, forthcoming), or how they might enact that as a critical pause time when asked a question they needed time to respond to.

They each drew for themselves in second space (imagined space) what their own fourth space looked like and thought about how they might respond when a student, colleague, administrator, parent, or community member challenged them on a topic related to social justice. As a class, we performed in third space (lived space where the real and imagined come together) these experiences and tried on various scenarios so that we could become more comfortable with potentially destabilizing situations.

For the two major assignments in class, students were asked to draw from their critical reflections and “6 re-s” activities that would span the rest of the semester. The first assignment was a three-part equity audit (see Groenke, 2010; Skrla et al., 2004), and the second was a geo-history investigation. For the first part of the equity audit, students were to do an autobiographical narrative in which they reflected in more depth on several questions relating to social justice and injustice in school.

Some of these questions included:

- What labels were attached to the classes you took? (Honors, college prep, AP, regular, etc.) What did you understand these labels to mean? Why did you take these courses?
- Were advanced (AP) courses offered at your school? In what subjects?
- Did you ever take vocational classes (home economics, automotive, cosmetology, etc.)? Why or why not?
- Were there groups of students in your school that you never saw in your classes? Who? Why do you think this was?
- Did you ever have classes where you were the minority (in race/ethnicity, gender)? Or were other students in your classes similar to you? How so?
- Did you have non-white teachers? In what subjects? Was the school faculty predominantly white?
- Did you get free or reduced-price school lunch? If not, did you buy your lunch every day or bring your lunch to school?
- Was bullying a problem at your school? Who got bullied? Was anything ever done about it?
- What extracurricular clubs/groups existed at your school? What activities were valued at your school?
- Who were the popular kids at your school? How did you know they were popular? What did their popularity afford them?
- Did teachers/administrators treat some students/classes differently than others? How so?
- Who were “good” teachers at your school? How did you know? What is your definition of a “good” teacher?

For the second part of the equity audit, students conducted an equity audit at a school site of their choice (adapted from Groenke, 2010). Depending on prior assessments, they were encouraged to tackle this task alone or in teams of three and locate someone in the field who is either doing an internship or student teaching in the undergraduate English education or MATE program.

Because there was quite a lot of work to be completed (see Table 8.1), students were encouraged to divvy up the categories. Students presented (PowerPoint, Prezi, or Excel chart) their findings, as well as any new insights gained and possibilities the team had for considering individual or collaborative action research projects.

The third part of the equity audit was to complete a final reflection (again, either individually or collaboratively) for which they were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Was it hard to get the data? Why?
- What did you have to do to get the data?

Table 8.1. Assignment 2: Equity Audit**General Data****Report fraction and percentage of each as applicable**

*Number of students in your district:

Number of students in your school:

Number of staff in your school (certified and noncertified):

How many teachers in your school teach outside of their content/expertise area?

How many teachers in your school hold: a) bachelor's degrees; b) master's degrees; c) doctoral degree?

How many teachers in your school have been teaching: a) 1–5 years; b) 6–15 years; c) 16–20 years; d) more than 20 years?

What is the teacher mobility/attrition rate at your school?

Who teaches advanced classes at your school? Long-time teachers or beginning teachers? Who teaches lower-track classes? Who teaches seniors? Freshmen?

Number of students who transferred or moved into the school the last academic year (disaggregate by race, disability, gender, ELL, and free/reduced-price lunch):

Students who transferred out of the school in the last academic year (disaggregate using above info):

Fraction and percentage of staff in your school who are associated with student services (for example, special education, counselors, nurses, bilingual specialists, reading specialists, literacy coaches, etc.):

Status of Labeling at Your School**Report total number (fraction) and percentage (*all)**

1. Students labeled "gifted" in your school:
2. Students labeled "at-risk" in your school:
3. Students labeled with a disability in your school:
4. Students labeled ESL, ELL, or bilingual in your school:
5. Students with any other kind of label in your school (include the label):
6. Graduation tracks at your school (for example, "basic," "advanced," "honors," "college prep," "AP")

Discipline Data

1. *Students who were suspended in the past year (disaggregate by gender, race, disability, free/reduced-price lunch, ELL; divide into in-school and out-of-school suspensions):
2. Students who were expelled in the past year (disaggregate using above info):
3. Students who were placed in alternative school setting (disaggregate using above info):
4. Low attendance and/or truancy (disaggregate by race, free/reduced-price lunch, ELL, disability, and gender):
5. Other relevant discipline data:

General Achievement Data

1. Eighth-grade achievement (disaggregate by race, free/reduced-price lunch, ELL, disability, gender):
2. Tenth-grade achievement (disaggregate using above info):
3. *Graduation rate (disaggregate using above info):
4. Graduated with an advanced/academic diploma (disaggregate using above info):
5. *Drop-out rate (disaggregate using above info):
6. Participation in ACT, SAT, AP courses/exams (disaggregate using above info):
7. Test results of ACT, SAT, AP exams (disaggregate using above info):

Social Class Data

1. *Students receiving free/reduced-price lunches in your school:
2. Students receiving free/reduced-price lunches in other schools in your district at the same level:
3. *Students identified for special education in your school:
4. *Of the number of students identified for special education, what fraction and what percentage receive free/reduced-price lunches?
5. How does the response to item 4 compare to item 1? The answers should be similar. If, for example, 60 percent of students identified for special education also qualify for free/reduced-price lunches, and your school has 20 percent of students receiving free/reduced-price lunches, students who receive free/reduced-price lunches are overrepresented in special education. Further, this means that, in this setting, if a student is from a lower socioeconomic class family, he or she is three times more likely to be labeled for special education than other students. What social class myths support these data?
6. Students labeled as "gifted" in your setting who receive free/reduced-price lunches. Compare with item 1.
7. Students identified as "at-risk" who receive free/reduced-price lunches. Compare with item 1.
8. *Reflect*: What do these social class data mean to you? What curriculum, programs, resources, etc., are available at your school for students of lower social classes? What ideas do you have for remedying weaknesses that exist in these programs?

Race and Ethnicity Data and Analysis

1. *Students of color in your school: How does this compare with other schools in your district?
2. Students of color in the total district:
3. *Of the number of students labeled for special education, what fraction and percentage are students of color?
4. How does this number and percentage compare with those in item 1?
5. How many students of color are labeled "at-risk"?
6. How many students of color are labeled "gifted"?
7. *Total certified and uncertified staff who are people of color in your school. Compare with response to item 1.
8. *Total staff who are people of color in your school:
9. People of color serving on the school board:
10. Report two pieces of academic achievement data (reading and math) as they relate to this area of diversity:
11. *Reflect* : Discuss the problems with the phrase, "I don't even see the person's color," and "But we do not have, or have very few, students of color in our school/district, so race isn't an issue here."

English Language Learners (ELL) and Bilingual Data

1. *How many English Language Learners are in your school and what languages do they speak? How does this compare to other schools in your district?
2. How many English Language Learners in the total district?
3. How many ELL students are labeled for special education?
4. How many ELL students are labeled "at-risk"?
5. How many are labeled "gifted"?
6. *What is the ELL service delivery model at your school? Are ELL students receiving quality instruction with certified teachers, or are they being "warehoused"?
7. *What is the total number of certified bilingual staff at your school?
8. Bilingual people on school board:
9. Report two pieces of academic achievement data (reading and math) as they relate to this area of diversity:

(Dis)Ability Data

1. Number of students labeled with (dis)abilities in your school:
2. How does this number compare with district total?
3. *Number of special education referrals a year:
4. Report two pieces of academic achievement data (reading and math) as they relate to (dis)ability:

Gender Data

1. *Females on the teaching staff at your school:
2. *Females teaching science/math classes:
3. *Females teaching English:
4. Females teaching history:
5. *Females teaching at the highest level of math:
6. *Females teaching AP courses:
7. *Out-of-school suspensions/expulsions by gender:
8. Females/males on administrative team:
9. Females on school board:
10. Report two pieces of academic achievement data (reading and math) as they relate to this area of diversity:

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

1. *Does your district have any active policies that address sexual orientation and gender identity?
2. How and to what extent does your district's curriculum provide instruction related to sexual orientation and gender identity?
3. *Does your school have a Gay/Straight Alliance? If not, why not?
4. Assess your school's library/media holdings related to sexual orientation and gender identity.
5. To what extent has professional development addressed sexual orientation and gender identity?
6. *To what extent are students teased or called names because of their gender identity or sexual orientation at your school? How do you know?
7. *Does your school have a gender-specific dress code?

Modified from Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly (2004) and Frattura & Capper (2007).
 *=required

- Did any of the data surprise you? What? Why?
- Did you expect any of the data? Explain.
- What questions do you have about the data?
- What does the data reflect in terms of areas where equity-minded work is needed?
- How can/will you address this need in your action research?
- You will need to make sense of the data and analyze it in some cases, which you can do in your team. Some of this work can be done individually and some collectively, and you can turn in one paper for the entire group.

Students shared these findings with the rest of the class and engaged each other with some of their concerns about teaching in schools that lacked a social justice consciousness.

Simultaneous to the completion of the equity audit, students began their geo-history investigation. For the assignment students could draw from any of the findings in their equity audits and expand on it as a unit of investigation for their geo-history investigation.

Based on class discussions up to this point, as well as becoming more aware of broader social injustices that impact equitable schooling practices, students were asked to identify a topic of social injustice in the community where they were raised, where they currently live, or in the neighboring city to the university, and examine the injustice based on the following criteria:

1. **Describe the context of the location.** In your description, provide a sense of the geographic place of the injustice through explication of its economic, historical, and political history.
2. **Describe the inhabitants.** By approximating percentages, describe the mix of ethnicities, social classes, religions, typical family make-up, immigrants, persons with disabilities, English as a first language speakers, and the gay/lesbian/bi/transgender population.
3. **Describe the schools.** How many public versus private schools and universities are there? Be exact. Check the department of education website for this, and then cite it.
4. **Explicate the social injustice.** In detail, describe the social injustice, where the injustice came from, how it impacts the population of people in the environment and if law sanctions it.
5. **More specifically answer:**
 - What is the dominant narrative about the social injustice?
 - Is the casting of the geo-history's social injustice linear? In other words, was a policy enacted that created an injustice? Was there a social injustice first? What caused the change?
 - What and who is left out, and how does that position the status quo or the population that is served?
 - What are the general consequences of the injustice in the local community?
 - Consider the accuracy of the geo-history (that is, who narrates it, who is left out, whose voices are included/excluded).
 - *How has the geo-history generated dichotomies of inclusion/exclusion, normal/abnormal, superiority/inferiority, and desirability/undesirability?*
 - What can your research now tell us about shifting an evolving geo-history? How can it be recasted? What was learned? What can we as English educators learn from this?
6. **Describe how the social injustice impacts a school.** To the best of your ability, explain how you see the social injustice and the answers to the above questions manifesting in a school of your choice. For this section, interview two to three teachers (or an administrator) at the school and investigate its impact on the school environment. **Please prepare a note**

for the teacher that invites him or her to be interviewed and explain the reason for the interview. You should meet the teacher at a time and location that is convenient to the teacher. **Five to six** questions should be prepared *in advance*, and they could range from a) *How does this social injustice impact your school? Consider how the geo-history has generated dichotomies of inclusion/exclusion, normal/abnormal, superiority/inferiority, and desirability/undesirability*; b) How does this injustice impact your classroom?; c) What agency do you have in impacting change, and what do you foresee being able to do? You can either take notes or use an audio recorder, but you will need to transcribe your interviews. This can also be done via email or Skype. Your findings from these interviews should be woven back into your paper as appropriate.

7. **Suggest possible solutions or resolve.** Based on your findings, consider solutions or suggestions for change that might be applied in the school or larger community. How can recasting this geo-history facilitate an awareness around social justice? Also brainstorm a lesson that you could use in a secondary language arts classroom that draws attention to the social injustice. Your brainstorm should include a rationale and then briefly discuss how you would teach the lesson. Synthesize the answers found in part 5 as well as provide your own suggestions.
8. **Type a thank you letter to the teachers** (or administrator) and send it along with part 6 in this assignment (including the lesson idea), synthesizing ideas for change.
9. **References:** Minimum of three.

Write-up

Your write-up should be no longer than six pages (excluding the sources), and encompass all parts of 1 through 7, double-spaced, 10–12pt. font, either MLA or APA. Use sources as relevant to the research on the social injustice (citing its historical or political genesis), etc. Minimum sources: three.

Please also submit (these are not included in the write-up, but are appendices):

Appendix A: The letter to the teachers.

Appendix B: The transcription of the interviews, or notes from the interviews, with coding notes.

Appendix C: The copy of the thank you letter sent to the teachers or the administrator.

Both of these major assignments combined ask students to look at a dominant social injustice narrative that sustains itself in dominant culture and to think critically about the messages that are disseminated: Where does this narrative come from? How does it get perpetuated? What and who is left out of this narrative? How does the narrative position the status quo of the population being discussed?

Students are then asked to think through the consequences of that injustice, consider the accuracy of the geo-history (that is, who narrates it, who is

left out, whose voices are included/excluded), question the casting of the geo-history's social injustice as linear (that is, was a policy enacted that created an injustice? Was there a social injustice first? What caused subsequent events?), and how the social injustice has positioned people, groups, ideas, and ideologies into various dichotomies of inclusion/exclusion, normal/abnormal, superiority/inferiority, and desirability/undesirability.

MOVING SOCIAL JUSTICE DISPOSITIONS INTO THE FUTURE

The impact of these assignments on preservice English teachers has the potential to offer the field of English education suggestions for threading social justice throughout our programs and for cultivating social justice dispositions. For instance, preservice English teachers, when afforded the opportunity to examine injustices in their own pasts and how it impacts their inner filters and inclinations when initially making sense of social justice and injustice, can be empowered to enact social justice in the schooling environments in which they teach and will teach.

Second, the design of assignments and measuring how it impacts preservice teacher growth, while simultaneously challenging students to consider how injustice impacts dichotomous social pairings, gains momentum for how to create more fair and equitable schooling experiences. The changes that occur within a teacher's inner filter and how that impacts inclinations can impact not only their school communities, but also their local communities, which then has potential to broaden in scope to the national community at large.

The emerging social justice consciousness that these preservice teachers can embody has the potential to sustain and spatialize those efforts through personal and communal agency, while simultaneously attempting to impact policy. Further, by tapping into the trichotomy of past/present/future and supporting students to think ahead about how to use past experiences in the future as a unifying framework that enabled them to gain agency, it can help them shift a situation and enact and try to sustain change.

Lastly, as more studies are conducted that continue to look at the performances and enactment of critical social justice work stemming from the practices and assignments in coursework, our standards for teacher assessment and dispositions can also shift. Such work can have far-reaching implications for policy and change.

However, in order for the spatiality of social justice change to be sustained, it would benefit our profession to embed social justice discourse into policies and into practice that can help to cement it into evolving geo-histories. As such, a social justice consciousness in the twenty-first century will

have powerful momentum and movement in the contexts it inhabits now and into the future.

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