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From Pages to Pedagogy: Studying Fictional Social Justice English Teachers in Young Adult Literature

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There is a robust amount of literature noting the importance of professional development within the education field, as well as effective types of professional development that positively impact teaching practices (Borko; Desimone; Skerrett and Williamson). With emphasis being placed on improvement of student outcomes, teachers and educators are continually searching for methods to further develop their knowledge and skills in a way that transforms their instructional practices and provides exceptional and equitable learning experiences for all students. While professional development is, undoubtedly, a critical component for improving educators' educational practices, professional development as a field has created an unintended hierarchy that relies more heavily, if not exclusively, on scholarly-based research materials while ignoring and omitting alternative and equally valuable materials such as literary works, including young adult literature. Even professional development centered on social justice English teaching neglects the potential of young adult literature (Skerrett et al.; Skerrett and Williamson). Young adult literature, we argue, can represent powerful tools for professional development and inform the cultivation of social justice English teaching.

By examining the teaching practices of fictional English teachers in three young adult novels, *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* (2017), *Anger is a Gift* (2018), and *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* (2015), we argue that using young adult literature for professional development creates an opportunity for English language arts teachers to develop a social justice teaching stance that is uniquely related to the field of English education. Positioning young adult literature as primary tool for professional development for English teachers creates a space for recursive learning to take place, where English teachers are able to learn from literary texts and in turn, teach through those very same texts. From young adult literature, educators are able to examine, and critique various social justice teaching practices and then draw direct connections

between their own social justice professional development and apply what they have learned in their own instructional practices within the classroom, using the same texts to address social justice related issues impacting their students.

Mizell states that effective professional development yields three levels of results: (a) educators learn new knowledge and skills because of their participation; (b) educators use what they learn to improve teaching and leadership; and (c) student learning and achievement increase because educators use what they learned in professional development (16). Professional development sessions that incorporate young adult literature are able to achieve all three levels of results. From the literary texts, educators are able to learn ways that different teachers address social justice issues and develop a social justice teaching stance to apply those same approaches within their own pedagogical practices. Additionally, when teachers not only use what they have learned from the texts, but also use the same texts as instructional materials, students' achievement can potentially increase because English teachers are directly incorporating professional development within their teaching.

Positionality of Researchers

Our own positionalities as teachers and researchers shape our interest in social justice English teaching. Understanding and naming our own relationships to the topics we teach and research is a vital part of a social justice classroom (Sensoy and DiAngelo 4). Cody is a cisgender queer white male who has taught high school English for seven years. He takes a social justice disposition towards his teaching, learning, and research in order to create English classrooms that he wishes he had while in high school. Mario is a cisgender black male studying language and literacy education. His research explores how literacy experiences and educational

practices are shaped by historical, social, and cultural issues related to minoritized students.

Tianna is a cisgender black female from Canada who has taught high school English and history in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) for over five years. Working in predominantly East Asian school communities, Tianna works to incorporate discussions of racism and anti-blackness in her teaching. As a graduate student her research explores race and education, more specifically the education of Black students in K-12 settings and how teachers incorporate race and racism in their classrooms.

Teachers in Young Adult Literature

While significant research has been conducted addressing teacher representations in television and film, including pedagogical implications of those representations (Dalton; Dalton and Linder), teachers in young adult literature have not received comparable attention (Rodríguez). Recent scholarship is beginning to address this gap. For instance, Rodríguez has examined teacher depictions in the works of Sandra Cisneros and Toni Cade Bambara while Boche has compared English teacher education standards to fictional English teachers. Despite the emergence of studies in the past five years, the gulf between studying teachers on screen and teachers on pages remains wide.

Young adult literature has become an important pillar in the conceptualization of English education as a field with an increasing number of articles, books, and journals dedicated to the study of teaching young adult literature in secondary English classrooms (Buehler; Garcia). The emphasis on teachers using young adult literature in their classrooms is an important one. The growing body of research tells us what English teachers have to say about young adult literature, but we also need the inverse: What does young adult literature tell us about English teachers?

Boche contends that fictional teachers can support preservice English teachers in developing quality teaching practices such as “relationships, care engagement, democracy and teaching the whole child” (87). Similarly, Rodríguez argues that studying teacher representation in young adult literature can support teacher candidates in developing a teacher identity that “advocates for adolescent students’ diverse abilities, backgrounds, cultures, interests, and needs through social action and justice” (84) in his book *Teaching Culturally Sustaining and Inclusive Young Adult Literature*. We outline exemplary English teachers and their pedagogies in this article to illustrate how fictional English teachers work for social justice within their schools. Specifically, we draw on English teachers from Jason Reynolds’ *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*, Mark Oshiro’s *Anger is a Gift*, and Sara Farizan’s *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel*. Finally, we address how these fictional English teachers can be a curricular tool in teacher education courses and teacher professional development for creating equitable pedagogies in real classrooms.

Rodríguez and Shoffner found three archetypes for teachers in popular media: The savior who acts like a messiah for students and their families; the scapegoat who is underpaid and blamed for society’s ills by external forces; and, the schoolmarm who shows no interest in students’ lives, opinions, and interests. The three characters we present in this article challenge all three representations by being caring and critical educators who understand their roles as members of a democratic society. They are not saviors nor do they view themselves as such. Rather, they are active participants in the lives and communities of their students.

Theoretical Framework: Social Justice English Teaching

Boyd succinctly defines social justice English teaching as “pedagogies that cultivate students’ abilities to dissect power relations and helping students locate themselves within these structures of power so that they can act for change” (12). Social justice English teaching is about more than text selection and instructional material. English teachers who enact social justice pedagogies must understand themselves as socio-cultural beings and use their power as educators to create social change in both their personal and professional lives (Miller and Kirkland). For English teachers, social justice education is a “paradigm for thinking about injustices in schools” to “provide youth powerful opportunities for real-time critical engagement with curriculum in schools” (Alsup and Miller 212). Social justice English teachers understand how socio-political and historical forces have created hierarchies that place certain socially situated identities at the top while marginalizing others. Thus, social justice English teachers center race, sex, sexuality, gender identity, class, ability, and other social identities in their teaching and pedagogy.

Social justice teaching has become a foundational framework for English teaching according to the nation’s leading English education organization. Formerly known as the Conference on English Education, the English Language Arts Teacher Education committee is the National Council of Teachers of English’s apparatus tasked with addressing the preparation and development of English teachers. In 2009, the committee issued a brief on its foundational beliefs of social justice teaching in English language arts. While acknowledging the difficulty and problematic nature of trying to distill social justice English teaching into finite features, the committee contended that social justice English teaching holds true that:

All students are worthy of human dignity, that all are worthy of the same opportunities in

an education, that the contract they enter into in schools must honor their sociocultural advantages and disadvantages, that it must seek to offer the same educational, sociocultural, and psycho-emotional opportunities to each student in order to help them meet and obtain a [determined] basic threshold that is mutually beneficial to each party who enters into the school space.

This conceptualization of social justice English teaching is useful in understanding how such teaching is about dispositions rather than a prescribed set of strategies, texts, or assignments. Social justice English teachers bring their disposition and values to all aspects of their teaching inside and outside the classroom.

Social justice teaching should be thought of contextually, and acknowledge that social justice teaching manifests differently in different secondary content areas (Pennell et al.). Social justice English teaching “draws connections to texts from students’ lives and environments as well as from broader society” with an analysis that focuses on power, privilege, and oppression (Boyd 7). Social justice English teachers, drawing on the field of cultural studies, take a broad definition of the concept of “text” to extend beyond print and include popular cultural artifacts, politics, and multimedia (Morrell). Social justice English teachers provide students with the space and language to critically engage with a variety of texts and understand how those texts are products of socio-cultural and political forces.

Texts Selection and Analysis

Drawing on the conceptualization of social justice English teaching outlined above, we then turned to popular young adult literature titles of the past ten years to locate fictional English teachers who embodied social justice pedagogies. Our search for exemplary teaching in the

pages of young adult literature did not yield many options. The grim reality that few titles offered compelling models of English teaching could speak to the disenfranchisement many marginalized students experience within school settings. In some of the more popular titles, such as Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* and Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*, schools antagonize Black students and replicate oppressive practices while LGBTQ students' humanity is often denied in the schools settings of *It Looks Like This* by Rafi Mittlefehldt and *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* by Adib Khorram. Dr. Jarius "Doc" Dray in *Dear Martin* stands out as a social justice educator, but his position as a social studies teacher places him outside our framework of analysis.

In short, few fictional English teachers seem to understand the roles power and privilege play in shaping educational experiences. Given trends of schools inflicting pain upon students in recently published books, the importance of social justice English teaching is heightened.

Fortunately, we were able to find exemplary social justice English teachers in three recent young adult titles: Jason Reynolds' *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*, Mark Oshrio's *Anger is a Gift*, and Sara Farizan's *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel*. All three fictional English teachers met the criteria of social justice English teaching as outlined in our theoretical framework.

Unless positioned as protagonist, fictional teachers typically operate as secondary characters in the young adult titles we analyzed. This reality limits the amount of textual evidence available for analysis. While all three teachers play important parts in the protagonists' lives outside of school, our initial analysis began by examining the teaching practices conducted within the fictional classrooms. The classroom segments of the books provided us with insight into the types of discussions the teachers promote as well as their position within the classroom. Then, we looked at how the fictional teachers develop relationships with their students inside and

outside of the classroom. Finally, because each book is told from a first person point of view, we examined how the protagonist of each book discusses their teacher.

We use these three fictional teachers—Ms. Blaufuss, Mrs. Torrance, and Ms. Taylor—because their pedagogies embody social justice English teaching and because the schools in which they teach in are fundamentally different. It is important to demonstrate such pedagogies in three drastically different school settings in order to demonstrate how social justice English teaching can be “undertaken and adapted by any teacher under any set of circumstances” (Boyd 16) and must have “efficacy in multiple contexts” (CEE). The socio-political and economic context of any school undoubtedly influences the ways in which social justice English teaching is enacted, which is why we first spend some time outlining the fictional schools in the books before moving into the specifics of teaching.

In the following sections, we demonstrate how the fictional English teachers from *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*, *Anger is a Gift*, and *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* embody social justice English teaching. Following our analysis, we outline how these three young adult titles can inform professional development for English teachers’ cultivation of social justice pedagogies.

Ms. Blaufuss in *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*

Miles Morales: Spider-Man, Jason Reynolds’ prose version of the popular comic book hero, follows the titular character throughout his junior year of high school as he balances life as a teenager and superhero. Like the graphic novel, Reynolds focuses on Miles Morales, an Afro-Latino New Yorker, for his young adult adaptation. Miles attends a private school, Brooklyn Visions Academy, and finds happenings at the school are causing his superhero powers to go

haywire. His English teacher in the book, Ms. Blaufuss, is a secondary character and is the only adult Miles trusts at his school.

Like its real life counterparts in many urban areas, Brooklyn Visions Academy relies on a dress code that makes White, upper middle class culture, attitude, and beliefs aspirational (Hatt-Echeverria and Jo; Vasquez Heilig, et al.). Low, drawing on a critical multicultural analysis of Brooklyn Visions Academy, criticizes the graphic novel equivalent of Miles Morales' narrative for advancing a neoliberal ideology about school reform. Jason Reynolds' adaptation challenges the supposed quality of Brooklyn Visions Academy by positioning a veteran teacher of the school, Mr. Chamberlain, as the embodiment of the school-to-prison pipeline (Worlds and Miller).

Ms. Blaufuss

Ms. Blaufuss, the English teacher, is seen as warm and caring. She doesn't dress like the other teachers at the school and has two tattoos: one of a slice of pizza and one of a semicolon. She decorates her room with posters of writers and sponsors the school's poetry club, the Dream Defenders. Miles notes that phrases Ms. Blaufuss says, like "the poetry all around you," would be annoying if any other teacher made them (Reynolds 54-55).

Ms. Blaufuss is described as having a "way of seeing the good in everything. Everyone" (154). She holds high standards for her students, but is not rigid in her policies. For instance, she offers ways for Miles to raise his grade when she suspects something is wrong with him. Despite never revealing to Ms. Blaufuss that he lives a second life as Spiderman, Miles trusts and respect Ms. Blaufuss. One Brooklyn Visions Academy teacher who antagonizes Miles, Mr. Chamberlain, attempts to berate Miles at an event but Ms. Blaufuss swiftly steps in and negates

her colleague's effort. Without Miles' explanation, Ms. Blaufuss senses the harm her colleague attempts to inflict on students and actively works to thwart it.

Throughout the book, Ms. Blaufuss uses her curriculum as a way to connect content with students' lived experiences. When Ms. Blaufuss assigns the students a *sijo*, a type of Korean poetry, Ganke shows excitement over school assessments and exclaims, "This is the poetry of my people! This is my birthright!" (Reynolds 42). Ms. Blaufuss also offers broad topics for writing assignments, which allows for students to place their own experiences and beliefs within the curriculum. For instance, Miles notes that he could write about how the "most heroic thing you could do is take care of your community" for an assignment on love (57). Later, Ms. Blaufuss assigns a "family exploration" project in which students trace why they were named their name (106). This project recalls a common English teacher assignment called "My Name," in which students use an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* as a mentor text to write about the history of their name. In each instance, Ms. Blaufuss is drawing upon "everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation" (Morrell 313).

Ms. Blaufuss also looks for opportunities to expand learning outside of the classroom context. Her most successful effort is the poetry night that she holds for the Dream Defenders. Her work outside of the classroom speaks to her view of students holistically. She rejects the "dominant ideologies that promote individualism and meritocracy" (Boyd 63) plaguing education and instead affirms that literacy, specifically poetry, is "about community" and "being a witness" to the expression of literacy among peers (Reynolds 58). Ms. Blaufuss works within

and outside of her classroom in “constructing a community of learners” (Boyd 21). This sense of community is evident by the number of students who attend the event for the Dream Defenders.

The character of Ms. Blaufuss offers implications for curriculum and community building for social justice English teaching. Her writing curriculum is positioned as an avenue for students to share their personal experiences. She knows her students as individuals and seeks to protect them when she senses their wellbeing is under threat. Finally, she works to create a community of learners who share their writings inside and outside of her classroom. Community involvement is often difficult for social justice English teachers (Boyd). Ms. Blaufuss offers a model of what community involvement with an English classroom could look like.

Mrs. Torrance in *Anger is a Gift*

Taking place in Oakland, California, *Anger is a Gift* follows Moss Jeffries a year after the killing of his activist father by the police. Moss, who is Black and queer, navigates panic attacks and body insecurity throughout the novel. Moss attends West Oakland High School, a school that is being drained of funding due to punitive accountability policies, and an increasing police presence at the school results in students being treated like criminals rather than students. The attacks on his public school from a militarized police force drive the central plot of the novel. Mrs. Torrance, Moss’ English teacher, is both a mentor at school and a close family friend.

Moss’ school reflects real life schools that could be described by Milner as “urban emergent.” Milner notes that urban emergent schools, while not located in large cities, experience similar challenges to urban schools such as scarcity of resources and increased police presence. For instance, the increased police presence in West Oakland High School mirrors real life in urban-like schools. This increased police presence is part of a system known as the

“school-to-prison pipeline.” Mallett explains that “this pipeline is best understood as a set of policies and practices in schools that make it more likely that students face criminal involvement with the juvenile courts than attain a quality education” (Mallett 15). While the federal government increases funding for police, these schools experience a decrease in overall funding, increasing school segregation and focus on test scores (Mallett). West Oakland High School is not simply a fictive school, but is rooted in the reality of urban spaces.

Moss is one of the many out LGBTQ students at West Oakland High School. Moss’ group of friends, mostly Black and Latinx queer teenagers, is collectively called a “queer family” by the group (Oshiro 129). Brockenbrough conceptualized the cultural and social positionings of students like Moss and his friends as “Black and Latino urban queer youth (BLUQY),” and argues that BLUQY should be understood as a unique cultural group whose “identifications and sensibilities as a collective of young people have been forged at the intersections of racial and queer otherness within urban contexts” (Brockenbrough 188).

Mrs. Torrance

Mrs. Torrance, the English teacher of *Anger is a Gift*, is admired by her students for her confidence, warmth, and dedication to the school. Several students admire Mrs. Torrance’s style, which includes dressing in “lavender from head to toe” (59), wearing a dashiki (206), the beads of her braids (60), and her dreads (303). Mrs. Torrance is described as “sure,” “certain,” “snappy,” and “purposeful” (303) and known for her “enthusiasm and humor” (63) by her students. Boyd argues that humor is an important part of holding high expectations, maintaining classroom relationships, and providing critical care (61). Mrs. Torrance is so well-known among the student body that students know her even if they have never attended her class.

Students at the school are not afforded reasonable class sizes as evident by Mrs. Torrance's English class that consists of 34 students (60). Nor are students afforded adequate material. The 21 copies of *Things Fall Apart* are literally falling apart, a point Mrs. Torrance makes to the class dryly (60). The school is underfunded due to test scores, a point that Mrs. Torrance makes explicit before acknowledging, "[w]e teachers hate them, too. But that's how the system is set up" (62). Later, Mrs. Torrance informs students that the school board has enacted policies that severely limited funding to any activity that isn't test prep and informs her students that the "system isn't set up" to support critical inquiry and authentic learning (100).

In this instance, Mrs. Torrance names the ways in which neoliberal policies have negatively impacted the schooling experiences of her students. Furthermore, she connects neoliberal education policies to structural inequities by noting to students the school doesn't have money for sports or clubs but has "*lots* of funding for these damn tests" (47). Mrs. Torrance understands the professional risk she is taking in speaking out against policies, but her conviction to justice outweighs her fear of administrative retaliation. Social justice English teaching requires teachers to "facilitat[e] youth's skills for critique of their social worlds" (Boyd 12). Despite her disdain for standardized tests, Mrs. Torrance is pragmatic. She reminds students that passing the tests is necessary and suggests students join the school's book club, which she personally funds, to deepen their "examination of the literature" (Oshiro 47). Mrs. Torrance understands the reality of standardization legislation but does not let that reality negate authentic English teaching. She provides quality literature instruction inside and outside of school that she knows will support students in passing the test, but she does not let the standardized test drive her instruction.

Under a particular stressful situation, Mrs. Torrance's "usual sharpness" gets "replaced with something closer to tenderness" (79). In the intense moment, Mrs. Torrance displays how to

enact critical care. It is not an isolated moment. Several segments in the book highlight the ways in which Mrs. Torrance embodies critical care. When Moss shows up to class without completing the assigned reading due to family issues, Mrs. Torrance is understanding and retains her high expectations that Moss complete the assignment on time, telling him, “As long as y’all are reading, I’m happy” (99). She does not dole out harsh punishment, but treats Moss “on an individual basis with the idea of equity in mind,” which “demonstrates that critical caring has to do with eliminating oppression” (Boyd 55). After an incident of police brutality at the school traumatizes the students, Mrs. Torrance hosts a discussion on the state of the school and policing in the hallways during class “instead of working on an essay she had assigned for the following week” (Oshiro 102). Mrs. Torrance is notably different from other teachers at the school who Moss describes as “never seemed to be interested in anything happening on campus that took place outside that classroom” (104). Mrs. Torrance understands that the social and political realities of students’ lives outside of her classroom do not end the moment students enter her classroom.

Mrs. Torrance validates the reality that her students face from an oppressive school system. She speaks back to the narrative that erases police brutality in the school when the principal calls the assault on a student from a cop an “incident” (101). In doing so, she is providing a space for students to “investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives that mainstream media and other social institutions use to construct and oppress Black youth” (Baker-Bell et al. 138).

Boyd argues that teaching itself can be a form of activism that “allows for the realization of social justice both in *how* and *what* educators teach their students” (7). As outlined, Mrs. Torrance’s teaching embodies social justice English teaching. Additionally, Mrs. Torrance is

known in the community for “organizing rallies” and “helping to protest every time the police shot and killed someone,” which resulted in her getting arrested “a lot” in her past (Oshiro 377). Mrs. Torrance brings that dedication to justice in her entire school. She comforts a student who has been attacked by a cop at school before she challenges the assistant principal who brought the cops into the school (83-86). In doing so, Mrs. Torrance is not offering students “empty words or sympathy” but rather channeling her understanding of her students’ lives “into validation of the student” (Boyd 55). She acknowledges the punitive school system that reflects the values of the prison system and how those values harm students. Her understanding is followed by action. Social justice teaching is “activist-oriented” (CEE). Mrs. Torrance is modeling activism by confronting the assistant principal in front of students.

BLUQY students’ educational needs extend beyond “protection from homophobic victimization” often associated with conversations about LGBTQ youth in schools (Brokenbrough 170). Moss and his friends are not bullied for their queerness in their school context. Rather, their marginalization stems from inequitable school fundings and racist policing structures. Brokenbrough argues that teaching BLUQY in a just way entails an “awareness not only of their shared culture but also of their experiences of that culture within urban landscapes” (175). This point is made apparent when Javier, Moss’ boyfriend, observes that “some people think being gay here in the Bay means that all our problems are solved” because queer people are viewed as a “single, solitary identity” (Oshiro 230). Conflation of being gay with being a rich and white Bay area resident erases the ways racism and classism work in tandem with homophobia to marginalize BLUQY. Mrs. Torrance understands that urban spaces like Oakland offer BLUQY a “unique combination of opportunities and dangers in their daily lives as raced and queered young people” (Brokenbrough 175). She knows that West Oakland High School

offers an affirming space for Moss and his friends' queer identities yet the broader school system threatens the existence and material reality of said space. The opportunity for queer affirmation is jeopardized by the dangers of gentrification and policing.

Ms. Taylor in *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel*

Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel details the life of Leila, a closeted Iranian American queer teen, as she navigates coming to terms with her sexuality and a potential relationship. Leila attends Armstead Academy, which is a non-religious private school located in the suburbs of Boston. The school is described as a “small community,” where gossip spreads quickly around and outside of campus (Farizan 45). Ms. Taylor, Leila's English teacher, is an important adult figure in Leila's life. Leila calls Ms. Taylor a “great teacher” (61), and she is the only adult Leila feels comfortable discussing her sexuality with initially.

Real world equivalents of Armstead Academy, that is non-religious private schools, generally have greater access to LGBTQ material and support than their public counterparts according to the 2017 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. The fictional Armstead Academy is a space where LGBTQ kids can be out, but their identities are not fully affirmed. Leila notes that there are a “few kids at Armstead who are out” (53). Tomas, who is the most “out and proud” student, was ambushed by masked students, sprayed with Silly String, and called a fag (53). In an attempt to make Tomas feel included after the attack, the most popular girls in the school folded Tomas into their clique. Tomas' inclusion was marked by tokenization in which Tomas was treated like he was a “fun new accessory... the way celebrities adopt babies like they're handbags” (53). There is a trio of openly gay female students known for being vegan, listening to feminist folk music, and being

members of the tech staff. They are known in the school as “gay tech number one,” “gay tech number two,” and “gay tech number three,” despite their names being Taryn, Simone, and Christina, respectively (51). Armstead Academy is not a space free from homophobia, tokenization, and even bullying. However, it is a school that has an LGBTQ community known across the student body, which is evident when Leila contemplates the opportunity to be friends with the out students at school.

Ms. Taylor

Ms. Taylor is known for her love of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and a general “enthusiasm for literature” (24). She and Leila developed a close relationship throughout the book. In the beginning of the book, Ms. Taylor is dating Mr. Harris, another teacher at Armstead Academy, however their relationship dissolves by the second half of the book. Ms. Taylor lets Leila know that she dated women in college while the two are attending a school dance (249).

In teaching *The Color Purple*, Ms. Taylor challenges students to disrupt their heteronormative reading of the text by explicitly asking them whether or not it is possible that Celie, a woman married to a man, could be attracted to another woman (4). By teaching a canonical text from a queer perspective, Ms. Taylor is helping students develop the “skills to deconstruct dominant texts carefully” (Morrell 313). Subsequently, Ms. Taylor is using a canonical text to open up a dialogue about sexuality and rigid gender roles. In doing so, Ms. Taylor sends the message that sexualities outside of heterosexuality exist and are worthy of classroom discourse. Silences and avoidances of queer identities in classrooms reinforce that such identities are shameful. Ms. Taylor’s positioning of *The Color Purple* challenges queer

erasure. Later, Ms. Taylor uses *The Scarlet Letter* to address sexist doubt-standards placed on women.

Ms. Taylor's commitment to creating an LGBTQ-affirming classroom has implications for Leila outside of school. Leila and Ms. Taylor are invited to a family dinner that goes awkwardly, especially because the hosts were unaware that Ms. Taylor is a vegetarian. On a drive home from dinner Leila begins to question Ms. Taylor's decision to date Mr. Harris, another teacher at Armstead Academy. Ms. Taylor is "speaking in the spirit of honesty" (Farizan 61). Ms. Taylor becomes the only adult that Leila can talk to about her first romantic encounter (143). Later, after Leila experiences heartbreak, Ms. Taylor ensures Leila that dating in college will be easier and that "women will be lined up around the block" to date her (249). Leila feels comfortable having these conversations with Ms. Taylor outside of class because Ms. Taylor has intentionally, through her pedagogy, positioned herself as an ally to LGBTQ students inside her classroom.

Additionally, Ms. Taylor understands that the humanity of her students outweighs school rules. During one class Lisa, a student who typically does not speak in class, opts to share her creative nonfiction essay. The essay includes the phrase "crock of shit," which draws a gasp from the class (Farizan 208). However, Ms. Taylor does not censor Lisa as she recognizes that Lisa is sharing a piece that is deeply personal and emotional. Lisa leaves the class after sharing her piece, which is technically skipping. Ms. Taylor allows Lisa to leave the room and process her emotions of sharing the piece of writing. Ms. Taylor is aware of the dehumanizing nature of many school policies that relegate speech and expression at the expense of students' humanity. Lisa's writing and expression is not evaluated in isolation. Rather, Ms. Taylor pays "keen attention to students' circumstances" and acts accordingly (Boyd 53).

Ms. Taylor's social justice English teaching has implications for teaching literature and classroom management. In both the teaching of her content and the structuring of her class, Ms. Taylor creates a space where students are able to be their authentic selves. Her challenging of heteronormativity in teaching *The Color Purple* allows Leila to be comfortable coming out to Ms. Taylor. Similarly, Ms. Taylor's understanding of Lisa's reaction when reading her essay lets students know they will not be punished for expressing their emotions even if that expression violates school rules.

Comparing Social Justice English Teachers

Schools play an important part in the plot development of all three books. As outlined above, Ms. Blaufuss, Mrs. Torrance, and Ms. Taylor teach in starkly different school environments. Yet, their commitment to social justice English teaching is apparent in each of their unique contexts. Across all three teachers we see that their English teaching challenges traditional perspectives and conceptualizations of teachers, connects curricular material to students' worlds, and validates students' identities and marginalization. As we argue, all three teachers understand that their students' race, gender, class, and sexual orientation shape their experiences in schools. Indeed, the identities of the protagonist play a central role in the narrative of all three books. Teachers' understanding of their students' identities and histories are apparent across the findings we detail in the following section.

Stated and Unstated Identities of the Three Teachers

Boyd argues that "teachers' and students' race, class, and gender exist in the classroom space" and "aspects of those identities are part of larger cultural narratives that affect students'

academic performance and behavior” (53). Ms. Blaufuss, Mrs. Torrance, and Ms. Taylor are all given stated and unstated identities throughout the three young adult titles. We consider where the identities of the three fictional teachers reflect their students’ identities and where their identities differ.

Both Mrs. Torrance and Ms. Taylor are in heterosexual relationships, though the latter teacher notes that she has dated women in her past. Additionally, the characteristics used to describe Mrs. Torrance’s hair signals that she is a non-white woman. Little is said about Ms. Blaufuss personally, outside of the fact that she has tattoos. This provides little information to the reader about Ms. Blaufuss’ racial or sexual identity. While the identities of each teacher is not made central to the story, it is implied that both Mrs. Torrance and Ms. Taylor may share similar social identities to their marginalized students. These shared identities may have allowed both Mrs. Torrance and Ms. Taylor to better connect with their students, who are often feel dismissed by the overall schooling experience. For decades, educational researchers have noted that the largely white teaching force has failed to meet the needs of students of color, particularly Black students (Picower; Sleeter). Sleeter notes that this matter because both Black and Latinx students “are much more likely than White students to be taught by teachers who question their academic ability, are uncomfortable around them, or do not know how to teach them well” (559).

Challenge “Traditional” Conceptions of how Teachers Should Act

The student narrators of all three books take note that Ms. Blaufuss, Mrs. Torrance, and Ms. Taylor know about their students’ lives outside of the classroom walls. Additionally, biographical and personal attributes become important to the way students interpret their teaching. Mrs. Torrance is known for her activism in the community, especially in her earlier

years. As the school in *Anger is a Gift* becomes infiltrated with external forces like the policy department, Mrs. Torrance's position becomes increasingly important as a figure with historical knowledge of both the school and the community. Students come to see Mrs. Torrance as a leader against the increasing influence of the police at their school because of her experiences as a community activist. Ms. Blaufuss' stylish fashion and tattooed body is a marked contrast to the other teachers at Brooklyn Visions Academy. Her aesthetic works as a symbol at the school. While other teachers dress in dull tones and teach in a manner that can be described as "traditional" in the worst sense, Ms. Blaufuss flouts assessment that is divorced from students' lives and interests. Students, including Miles, note that Ms. Blaufuss cares about the wellbeing of them outside their academic identity.

Boyd argues that social justice teachers "shift relational power dynamics typically found in schools because they value their students as human beings, outside of being a pupil" (36). Ms. Blaufuss, Mrs. Torrance, and Ms. Taylor all know their students "across boundaries" of school and home, and understand how race, gender, class, and sexual orientation shape their experiences in school (Boyd 36). Their actions challenge typical student-teacher relationships, which value "objectivity" and avoid discussions of personal lives. All three teachers share aspects of their personal lives with students to build rapport and relationships with their students. It's telling that Miles, Moss, and Leila all note that their respective teachers are their favorite teachers.

We are not seeking to lionize the three teachers as individuals who offer stark contrast to a cadre of bad teachers. Narratives about social justice educators have the potential to fall into savior tropes by positioning individual educators against the broader teaching force (Theoharis). We reiterate that an aim of social justice education is to move beyond the neoliberal obsession with the individual's merit and towards a collective vision of schooling (Boyd; CEE). Neither

Ms. Blaufuss, Mrs. Torrance nor Ms. Taylor seek to position themselves in terms of their individuality against the majority of their school's teaching force. However, it is important to note the way both teachers are positioned in their schools, specifically by their students, due to their social justice dispositions.

Connect Curricular Material to Students' Lived Experiences and Realities

Mrs. Torrance and Ms. Taylor both teach canonical literature in a critical manner that supports students in drawing connections between the texts and their lives. The former implicitly draws parallels between the methods the school board uses to police and underfund the school and the ways in which the colonizers usurped power and identity from Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. The latter openly questions the heteronormative reading of a straight couple in *The Color Purple* to have students think about relationships and boundaries around sexuality in their own lives.

Ms. Blaufuss, Mrs. Torrance, and Ms. Taylor all avoid the banking model of education, which positions teachers as the sole expert and students as empty vessels meant to be filled with prescribed knowledge (Freire). All three teachers recognized the "shared power" (Body 80) classroom talk represents. Ms. Blaufuss allows discussion to produce writing prompts, Mrs. Torrance uses class talk to connect the content of novels with the happenings in students' schools, and Ms. Taylor supports students in leading class discussions based on students' writings. In doing so, all three teachers demonstrate that they "believe adolescents have something meaningful to say" and have established "mutual trust" and an "attitude of working alongside one another" (Boyd 80). All three English teachers connect their content to the real

world and allow students to engage in the relationships between the content and their lived experiences to provide students with the power to “name the world for one’s self” (Body 80).

Validate Students’ Identities and Marginalization

All three teachers understand that marginalized students bring “inequitable histories” (CEE) due to systemic oppression but do not allow those histories to act as barriers against students’ academic potential. Both Mrs. Torrance and Ms. Taylor position themselves as allies to LGBTQ students and embody critical care to Moss and Leila by acknowledging and challenging systemic homophobia. Mrs. Torrance and Ms. Taylor do more than offer mere acceptance of their students’ queer identities. Rather, they provide space for Moss and Leila to discuss dating and heartbreak. Mrs. Torrance and Ms. Taylor have created spaces where their students can discuss their queer identities beyond the coming out process. By addressing the ways racism, homophobia, and classism intersect with school and police policies, Mrs. Torrance supports queer students in naming oppressive structures. Mrs. Torrance works to raise the critical consciousness of her Black and Latinx queer students, which Brockenbrough notes is vital for Black and Latinx queer-affirming pedagogy.

Such inequitable histories manifest in classroom experiences of marginalized students. The three teachers understand the “consequences of microaggressions likely appear in their classrooms” (Boyd 57). These teachers try their best to provide affirming spaces for their students but also know that schools are not “safe” for everyone. Kandaswamy challenges the idea of safe schools as it implies that they can be free from the “isms” of society, and notes that while “the classroom is not a space outside of society, and students and teachers do not check

their histories at the door when they enter it” (7). The three fictional English teachers seem keenly aware of this point.

The fictional English teachers also support their students in efforts to challenge the marginalization they face because of schools. Mrs. Torrance appears at a student protest along with her partner, Walter, much to Moss’ surprise (Oshiro 206). Ms. Blaufuss implicitly affirms students’ decision to walk out of a teacher’s class to protest the inequities in the school curriculum and discipline system (Reynolds 254). Morrell called for English teachers as a profession to “participate collectively in movements for educational and social justice” and “model for future English teachers just what it means to act as a public intellect” (319). By showing up and standing with their students, Mrs. Torrance and Ms. Blaufuss illustrate what a collective movement with students can look like.

Young Adult Literature as Teacher Professional Development

Young adult literature has been shown to be a powerful tool for professional development, especially in helping teachers better understand the issues that face teenagers whose experiences and identities are different than their own (Bach et al.). Additionally, the inclusion of young adult literature in teacher education courses has been shown to increase teacher candidates’ knowledge around special education (Hughes et al.) and school issues like bullying (Pytash et al.). Glenn argues that young adult literature, when positioned as counter-narratives in teacher education courses, can support white preservice teachers in challenging their own marginalizing views of communities of color. Finally, Olan and Richmond contend that young adult literature supports preservice teachers in developing culturally responsive pedagogies. Each of these examples speaks to the role young adult literature can play in teachers’

professional development. We believe studying exemplar fictional teachers in young adult literature can act as a powerful professional development vehicle for preservice and practicing teachers.

Few professional developmental opportunities focus on social justice, especially in schools that serve some of the most marginalized students (Skerrett; Skerrett and Williamson), which is why we conclude our analysis of the three texts with suggestions for teacher professional development. Teachers, both practicing and preservice, can read *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*, *Anger is a Gift*, and *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* to examine concrete, even if fictional, examples of social justice English teaching in the classroom. Boyd contends that the “ways teachers act for social justice” can be learned (9). We offer two suggestions for what that learning process could entail. Skerrett, Warrington, and Williamson argue that professional development relating to social justice English teaching should deepen teachers’ “knowledge and skills in an area” and support the development of “increasingly complex questions and ambitious goals for their learning in an area of professional practice” (129). Their guideline informs our suggestions.

Our first suggestion focuses on English pedagogical practices. Table 1 can be used to conceptualize social justice English teaching as enacted within a classroom. We address pedagogical practices typically associated with English language arts teachers such as reading literature, writing, and conducting research papers. Then, teachers can provide examples of how fictional English teachers address those practices from a social justice disposition. Finally, teachers can contextualize their learning from the books in their own classrooms by outlining how they would implement a similar practice, which would be placed in the final column.

Table 1

Social Justice English Pedagogical Practices

Pedagogical Practice	Fictional ELA Teacher Example	Implications for practice
Reading literature	Mrs. Torrance connects historical colonialism with contemporary colonialism	Teachers can select texts that explore contemporary examples of colonialism.
Writing narratives	Ms. Blaufuss takes a democratic approach to writing prompts for students, allowing students to offer suggestions and the class to vote on the topic they'd like to write about	Students are given the opportunity to provide suggestions for writing prompts and have the choice of which one they prefer.
Research papers	Ms. Taylor assigns an essay that allows students to connect the broad socio-political movement to people's daily lives	Teachers can explicitly ask students to connect texts to current socio-political movements.
Class discussions	Mrs. Torrance allows students to critically question the financial status and material condition of their school even if it doesn't follow her daily lesson plan	Teachers can create democratic structures for students to select the topics, texts, and questions of their class discussions
Classroom management	All three teachers have relationships with the protagonists and regularly check in on their wellbeing, which stands in contrast to authoritarian modes of classroom management	Teachers can have classroom meetings at the start of class to build community and share ideas for community norms

This article focuses on English teachers whose pedagogies aligned with the aims of social justice education. However, English teachers can also be prompted to identify socially unjust practices within young adult literature in order to generate counter-practices. To elaborate, English teachers can identify oppressive practices, analyze why such practices are harmful, and then provide examples of how they could counter unjust practices in their classrooms.

Our first suggestion focused on classroom practice implications from the young adult titles. Our second suggestion, revised literature circles for teachers, addresses schools and classrooms ecologically. The aim of our suggested literature circles is to support teachers in naming and analyzing the socio-political, historical, and cultural situating of schools. Then, Guise, and Sloan restructured student roles associated with traditional literature circle pedagogy in order to bring a critical analysis to multicultural texts for secondary students. Similar to those scholars' restructuring, we revise the typical roles associated with literature circles. But our roles are intended to be held by English teachers. Our new roles exist to support preservice and practicing teachers in critically analyzing and discussing young adult literature with the goal of cultivating social justice English pedagogies. English teachers can form groups in a way that makes the most sense to them. For example, English teachers can create an online community through Twitter or meet in person through their department meetings.

Table 2

Literature Circle Roles for Social Justice English Teachers

Role	Description	Examples from YA Titles
Text Curator	Curates a list of nonfiction texts (articles, books, blogs, etc.) that can be used to deepen teachers' understanding of a concept or issue from the young adult title	The text curator might create a text set to explain and analyze the school-to-prison pipeline, which is the central antagonist in <i>Miles Morales: Spider-Man</i> or create a text set to detail the history of gentrification and its impact on public schools, which is foundational to the plot of <i>Anger is a Gift</i>

Systems Analyzer	Identifies systems of oppression, their manifestations, and their impact on school communities in the young adult title; documents how prejudice, discrimination, and oppression happen within the text	The systems analyzer might explain how the discipline system at Brooklyn Visions Academy, which targets Black students, and the history curriculum, which praises the Confederacy, are forms of oppression in <i>Miles Morales: Spider-Man</i> or explain the way LGBTQ students are treated by peers at Armstead Academy is a form of discrimination in <i>Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel</i>
Student Observer	Views the cultural practices students enact in schools, how students create communities within their school system, and how those practices and communities are used to affirm their identities and resist oppressive forces	The student observer might examine how the group of “gay techs” in <i>Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel</i> create a space for their queer identities to flourish in the tech space of the school or examine how Moss and his friends form of a “queer family” across multiple school settings in <i>Anger is a Gift</i>
Classroom Connector	Makes connections between the fictional classrooms, pedagogies, and schools in the text to the real school communities and classrooms of the teacher group	The classroom connector may discuss the importance of the Dream Defenders poetry group from <i>Miles Morales: Spider-Man</i> and then brainstorm ideas to create a similar group at their own school or discuss how Mrs. Torrance works as an activist in <i>Anger is a Gift</i> and create a plan to advocate for specific school policies

We illustrate these roles with the three titles we’ve analyzed. However, this particular suggestion can be applied to any young adult title that features school as its prominent setting. Our literature circle roles prompt teachers to understand students and schools as socio-cultural

beings situated in particular historical and political landscapes, which is vital to enacting social justice English teaching (Boyd; CEE).

Our two suggestions can be amended to fit the context of preservice and practicing teachers. For instance, a teacher education course could assign parts from table 1 for preservice teachers as a class activity. Preservice teachers can identify the pedagogical practices in the book and then connect those practices to their future classrooms and other course reading materials. Practicing teachers can complete the literature circle roles (see table 2) through their department meetings or with other English teachers in their districts. Regardless of structure, these suggestions place English teachers, preservice and practicing, in dialogue with young adult literature to generate ideas for enacting social justice English teaching.

Conclusion

English teachers' relationship with young adult literature must be multifaceted. English teachers need to develop socially just pedagogies in teaching young adult literature in their classrooms. Morrell argues that students must become critically conscious of the ways language, literacy, culture, and power shape society and experiences within schools. Teachers are tasked with helping students achieve such critical consciousness that Morrell calls for. However, before teachers are able to help students develop social justice stances, they must first embody a social justice disposition that is reflected in their own teaching practices. Young adult literature represents a medium through which teachers themselves are able to cultivate such stances. As we outlined, English teachers can turn to young adult literature to find examples of socially just pedagogies.

Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips argue that young adult literature has the power to cultivate activist dispositions in the current generation of adolescent students. We believe that potential is not limited to only readers who are secondary students. Rather, young adult literature offers a pathway for English teachers to approach their pedagogies and identities from a social justice activist disposition. Our analysis identified three texts that featured social justice English teachers. We urge English educators to continue our analysis of fictional English teachers as the production of young adult titles sees its rapidity continue to grow. In doing so, it is also our hope that English educators will conceptualize how depictions of English teachers in young adult titles can inform the professional development of practicing and aspiring social justice English teachers.

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