

The Role of Reading Instruction in Teaching for Social Justice

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College reading instruction warrants recognition as a necessary and actionable means of teaching for social justice. Faculty who teach students how to read course texts—and who guide and support them in doing so—advance social justice and equity via three separate mechanisms of action. These processes preferentially benefit marginalized and underserved students while more broadly fostering conceptual and perspective-taking skills essential for social justice.

How best to teach for equity and justice has been declared one of the “fundamentally important questions” (Kinloch 318) that teachers and educational scholars now face. While broadly applicable to K–20 education in the context of increasing political and economic polarization, as well as “endemic inequalities in educational opportunities, access, and outcomes” (Chang and Cochran-Smith 2), this question is of particular importance to two-year colleges, which serve a more diverse and economically vulnerable student body than any other college system. In this sense, two-year colleges are quite literally social justice institutions (Sullivan) where the work of teaching is the “work of antiracism and class mobility” (Jensen 322).

As one response to this question, we assert that explicit instruction and scaffolded support for reading constitute a necessary component of teaching for equity and social justice—especially in 100-level courses in English and First-Year Writing (FYW) in open-access institutions. In such contexts, deliberate and guided practice in reading fosters equity and advances social justice via *direct*, *conceptual/analytical*, and *empathetic* mechanisms of action. These processes preferentially benefit marginalized and underserved students while more broadly fostering the analytical and perspective-taking abilities on which social justice depends.

Where We Come From

We wrestled with the question of how best to teach for social justice over the course of a research seminar. Designed for graduate students working as first-year writing

instructors, the seminar prepares students for positions in two-year colleges that include introduction to literature courses as well as FYW. The idea is to add training in the teaching of reading and literature to the expertise in teaching composition that students already have. However, what actually happened in our case was very different.

First, the seminar attracted students preparing to teach in high schools as well as in two-year colleges. Because reading and writing are integrated in secondary

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contexts, writing/reading contrasts were quickly dispatched as false distinctions. Second, rather than acquiring an additional area of expertise, the FYW instructors instinctively integrated the reading research we included into the rhetorical approaches they used in their composition classes. Reflective of current research on the interdependence of writing and reading processes (e.g., Shanahan; Graham et al.; Zagata et al.), they found instruction

and support in reading to facilitate improvement in writing and vice versa. Finally—and regardless of whether we were examining evidence within or outside FYW and English education—we repeatedly found ourselves returning to the importance and impact of explicit instruction in reading when discussing issues pertaining to social justice and equity. Following this observation with interdisciplinary research reviews, we could only conclude that explicit instruction in reading is not merely a useful but a *necessary* component of teaching for equity and social justice.

In fact, the absence of explicit instruction and guided support in reading works against teaching for equity and social justice in many ways. To begin with, FYW and English faculty who assign but do not teach reading miss key opportunities for recognizing the community and cultural assets (Yosso) and the expertise and content knowledge their students bring to their classes. This omission is not simply a missed opportunity but a key source of the misperceptions that can foster deficit thinking on the part of faculty and resistance on the part of students. Similarly, explicit instruction and support in reading facilitates the kinds of critical analyses and insights that analytical approaches to teaching for social justice require (Sealey-Ruiz “Building Racial Literacy”; Suh “Engagement”; Suh and Dyer). Devoid of this instruction and support, many students find themselves both disempowered and disengaged by social justice-centered curricula, an outcome both ironic and “antithetical to the equity mission of college reading” (Suh, “Engagement” 121). Most importantly, curricula and classrooms that don’t provide such instruction and support create “rich get richer” (Lichtenberg) processes that magnify previous inequities and biases, transforming differences in K–12 preparation and school resources into much larger differences in college grades, pass rates, and subsequent opportunities—effectively turning college classrooms into engines of inequity and social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron).

Fortunately, we now have ample evidence that faculty who provide explicit and guided instruction in reading can confront, interrupt, and counter such processes.

It is in this sense that college reading instruction warrants recognition as a necessary and actionable component of teaching for equity and social justice.

An Integrative Review

Methodologically, our approach in this article is closest to what nursing researchers call an *integrative* review. In nursing, which shares with teaching a focus on practice and care, integrative review methods emerged out of a desire to establish actionable, evidence-based strategies in circumstances where the research literature includes competing paradigms and methodologies. This was advantageous for us, as our quest to explore the role of reading instruction in teaching for equity and social justice took us into research that included theoretical, quantitative, qualitative, and experimental studies. Importantly, we also liked the emphasis in integrative reviews upon holistic understandings and the explicit manner in which they are designed for “direct applicability to practice and policy” (Whittemore and Knafl 546).

In keeping with the integrative review method, we began with a “clear identification of the problem that the review is addressing and the review purpose” (Whittemore and Knafl 546). In our case, NCTE president Valerie Kinloch’s question of how best to teach for equity and justice was our problem; our purpose was to more narrowly explore the role and place of explicit instruction and support for reading in addressing this problem. Mindful of criticism that the concept of social justice has been overused and underdefined (Hyttén; Chang and Cochran-Smith), we selected clarifying definitions of equity and social justice. Then, to ensure that our analysis would fairly reflect the diversity of educational research on teaching for social justice, we consulted comprehensive reviews on the topic, including those by Wen-Chia Chang and Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Kathy Hyttén and Silvia Bettez, and Claudia Ramirez Wiedeman. Because Hyttén and Bettez focus more attention on approaches to teaching for social justice in college, we adopted their categories and considered the role and place of explicit instruction in reading in relation to each of the strands of research on teaching for social justice that they identified. Applying relevant, interdisciplinary reading research published in TETYC and elsewhere to the logic of *how* each of these approaches help advance the cause of social justice, we found that deliberate and guided instruction in reading fosters equity and advances social justice via *direct*, *conceptual/analytical*, and *empathetic* mechanisms of action.

New Recognition of the Importance of Reading in FYW and Antiracist Education

While this article draws from a diverse range of research traditions, it builds directly on previous calls in this journal to “attend to the role of reading in the college classroom more carefully” (Hassel 142) and to the resurgence of interest in college reading that has risen over the last decade. The 2022 *CCCC Position Statement on the Role of Reading in Writing Classrooms* established a high-water mark of sorts in this resurgence, as well as a new consensus regarding the importance of reading in first-year writing.

Affirming “the need to develop accessible and effective reading pedagogies in college writing classrooms,” the statement declared the importance of explicit instruction in reading comprehension, challenging instructors to help students learn to “read like a writer” and to metacognitively reflect on and apply a variety of reading strategies.

Informed by long-standing demonstrations of the importance of reading in college and occupational success more generally, the CCCC statement incorporated new recognition of reading as a recursive, meaning-making activity, more like and connected to writing than was previously understood. “Not since the 1980s and early 1990s,” the statement explained, “have those outside of community colleges paid sustained attention to reading as the counterpart of writing in the construction and negotiation of meaning.”

While reflective of cognitive and interactive models of reading (Pearson and Cervetti), the CCCC statement was preceded by scholarship asserting that reading, because it is an active and situational process of meaning making, belongs in the

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writing classroom (Sullivan et al.). In a fascinating argument within this vein of inquiry, Sheridan Blau went so far as to argue that teaching literature in writing classes could *rescue* literary study from its more passive, colonial, and teacher-centered affiliations in literature programs. Finally, recognition of the value and importance of reading informs current

arguments for renaming the work of teaching both English and FYW in two-year contexts as *literacy studies* (Penner).

This article also builds on recent descriptions of instructional approaches that center reading instruction in efforts to teach *racial literacy* (e.g., Sealey-Ruiz “Building Racial Literacy”; Suh “Raciolinguistic”) and to expose, analyze, and challenge racial injustice and inequity. These approaches, which Asao Inoue calls *antiracist reading practices*, comprise “a kind of reading that simultaneously looks into the individual’s habits of language and out to larger structures that determine those habits” (“Engagement” 135). Inoue, together with scholars who have pushed and extended his methods (e.g., Suh and Dyer), usefully provides actionable advice and detailed classroom examples so that faculty who wish to add these forms of explicit instruction in reading know where to start.

Unfortunately, the absence of explicit instruction and support for reading is more frequently the norm than the exception in FYW, English, and college generally (Bruno et al.; Del Principe and Ihara). We confirmed this in an informal survey of courses students in our seminar had taken during their experiences in two- and four-year institutions. While all their courses included assigned texts, almost none included explicit instruction, guidance, or support for *how* to read the assigned work. Several explanations have been advanced to explain this absence: faculty may not view teaching reading as a responsibility of their discipline (Del Principe and Ihara) or may not know how to teach reading (Bruno et al.); faculty may fear that

challenging reading tasks could hurt their teaching evaluations (e.g., Jolliffe) or, ironically, lower pass rates for marginalized students. Finally, external reform efforts have removed developmental reading courses, which comprised a key resource for such instruction, in many two-year colleges (Suh “Raciolinguistic”). Consequently—and in spite of the resurgence of interest and research in college reading—the amount of time and instruction devoted to the teaching of reading appears to have declined. Reading surveys conducted before the pandemic also suggest that college-age students have been reading fewer books and doing less of the assigned reading for at least two decades (Gioia; Burchfield and Sappington). This doesn’t necessarily mean they fail. In fact, two-year college students often learn to succeed “without actually reading assigned texts” (Del Principe and Ihara 183). While not reading is associated with the busy lives and necessary compromises two-year college students make when juggling family, school, and work obligations, Del Principe and Ihara found that it more directly follows from teaching practices wherein texts are assigned but “not utilized or assessed” (201). That is, the deficiency resides not in our students but in our instruction. Therefore—and as suggested in the CCCC statement—it is a phenomenon we can do something about.

Defining Equity and Social Justice in Education

First, some definitions. We begin with Lee Anne Bell’s assertion, highlighted in the widely used textbook *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, that “the goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (1). “Equity,” in this context, refers to such “full and equal participation,” a condition that requires individuals be “self-determining” and “able to develop their full capacity” (1). Within education and other fields dedicated to serving or helping others, equity entails both *resources* and *results*. For instance, the American Psychological Association’s *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Framework* notes that “equity involves providing resources according to the need to help diverse populations achieve their highest state of health and other functioning” (12).

Approaches to teaching for equity and social justice can be distinguished by their focus and by the level of abstraction with which they frame “full and equal participation” and the “diverse populations” served. This is made evident in Hytten and Bettez’s review of the central approaches to foregrounding social justice in educational research. Seeking to “sort through the social justice literature in education in order to develop a better understanding of what this work is all about” (9), Hytten and Bettez reviewed hundreds of studies in an effort to describe the “multiple discourses that educators draw upon when claiming a social justice orientation” (8). Ultimately, they concluded that educational research on teaching for social justice can be understood as deriving from “five broad strands or usages” (9), including “practical” approaches, “philosophical/conceptual” strands, “ethnographic/narrative” usages, “theoretically specific” orientations, and “democratically grounded” discourses. Within this system of classification, the purpose of “practical” approaches is to measurably achieve social justice and equity within specific classrooms, programs, and institutions. In contrast,

“philosophical/conceptual,” “ethnographic/narrative,” and “theoretically specific” orientations more generally advance understanding and recognition of bias and other forms of social injustice—particularly as they function within systems. While distinct, these three traditions all share the logic that understanding oppression is essential to preparing students to be able to recognize it and work to end it. “Democratically grounded” approaches function at both the personal and societal levels, emphasizing education designed to prepare citizens who value and participate in justice-oriented civil and democratic processes. Key to the central thesis of this article, we find explicit instruction and scaffolded support for reading a necessary component of teaching for social justice within all of these orientations. This is demonstrated by the manners in which these strands or usages align with reading research demonstrating *direct*, *conceptual/analytical*, and *cognitive/empathetic* mechanisms of action that facilitate teaching for social justice.

Direct Mechanisms of Action

According to Hytten and Bettez, “practical” strands of foregrounding social justice in education describe “what works in challenging inequities and creating more genuine equality of opportunity” (13). That is, they are evidence-based and specific to defined contexts, such as a classroom, program, or school. Both “practical and experiential” (12) approaches in this genre align with outcome-based conceptions of social justice in that they focus upon curricula and approaches that measurably improve equity in student outcomes such as enrollment, engagement, final grades, and pass rates. In the terms we are using, the mechanism of action by which such practical approaches advance social justice is *direct* because they quite immediately 1) interrupt inequities in resources and preparation students bring with them into our classes and 2) generate *results* that foster equity in student outcomes.

While somewhat reductive, practical outcome-based notions of educational equity are grounded in empirical evidence and are action oriented at the classroom level. As Hytten and Bettez note, they also “fill what many see as a practical gap in much of the work in critical, leftist theory” (13). In addition to their direct impact upon equity in classroom results, practical approaches shape broader processes of equity and justice via their impact on subsequent resources and opportunities. In this sense, they can help us to recognize which classrooms are most important when examined with a social justice lens. Given that the association between first-year college grades and rates of graduation is one of the strongest and most enduring in college success research (e.g., Kuh et al.), they highlight the particular importance of FYW and other introductory classes that students take at the onset of their college careers. Finally, practical approaches to social justice are in keeping with other outcome-based conceptions of equity, such as Ibram Kendi’s description of an antiracist policy as “any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups” (18). A growing body of interdisciplinary research in such “practical” traditions focuses on explicit instruction and support for reading.

Experimental Research on Direct Methods

A long and robust body of literature describes reading strategies and interventions that benefit students in introductory college courses. While a review of this literature exceeds the scope of this article, we found much to learn from Perin and Holschuh's review of strategies and approaches and Pearson and Cervetti's history of the conceptions and models of reading that inform reading instruction. Closer to our purposes, recent research on interdisciplinary, instructor-led initiatives, "grounded in a commitment to the values of equity and collaboration," provide models of how faculty can support each other in teaching reading to advance equity and social justice (Bruno et al.). And several scholars have more recently demonstrated how attending to "strategic reading" as a transferable skill can point to a pedagogical path forward that supports students from diverse backgrounds in their early encounters with higher education" (Hilberg 133). Surprisingly, however, the most explicit demonstrations of how instruction and support for reading directly advances equity may be found in recent science education research.

In a popular and widely distributed book in this tradition, *Inclusive Teaching: Strategies for Promoting Equity in the College Classroom* (Hogan and Sathy), Kelly A. Hogan explains that her interest in approaches to teaching for equity followed distribution by her college teaching and learning center of grades in gateway science courses, disaggregated by student characteristics, including race and ethnicity. Consistent with national data demonstrating enormous disparities in rates of success and graduation for students of color seeking science degrees, these data suggested endemic patterns of inequity in courses such as the introductory biology sequence she taught. Realizing that her own classes were contributing to these inequities, Hogan joined a broader group of interdisciplinary scholars and teachers designing and testing curricula and teaching strategies in terms of their impact upon equity in student outcomes.

Widely circulated by accreditation agencies, college teaching centers, and other venues, Hogan and Sathy's book has helped to popularize a broader, national effort to add accountability for measurable progress in concrete indicators of racial equity and social justice at colleges and universities. Influenced by racial equity tools, scorecards, action guides (e.g., Bauman et al.; Bensimon), and large national events such as the two-year college-focused Student Equity Planning Institute (Felix et al.), these efforts are grounded in broader, theoretical models of how "everyday racism" and systemic barriers and biases (e.g., Essed; Bonilla-Silva) drive inequities in student achievement. While varied, these efforts share common assumptions:

- > Racial inequities follow from systems and structures of policies and practices that may appear race-neutral.
- > Racial inequities are usefully identified at the college, program, and classroom level by disaggregating outcomes by race and ethnicity—final grades and rates of participation, retention, and graduation especially.
- > Individual faculty can be challenged and empowered to directly teach for equity and social justice by making evidence-based instructional changes and tracking their impact upon disaggregated achievement data derived from their own courses.

An expanding body of research on college teaching follows this methodology. While statistical, it shares many features with practice-based research methodologies common to TETYC, such as critical-action research, because it features teachers making changes in their own classrooms to address systems of inequity and then evaluating the results (e.g., Hadfield). Collectively, the methods studied in this research prioritize inclusive cultural representations, instructor warmth and support, and constructivist approaches to student learning that reduce lectures, increase the amount of class time devoted to student talk and other forms of active processing, and instructional scaffolding.

While the definition and origin of instructional scaffolding is somewhat contested (Smagorinsky), the many advantages of providing formal assistance that builds on and engages prior knowledge and experience to help students learn new

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concepts and skills are well documented, particularly when students are asked to apply new concepts and skills to solve complex problems (Hmelo-Silver and Azevedo). Reducing lectures and structuring in-class activities to emphasize small-group tasks, think-pair-share activities, collaborative problem sets, inquiry-based learning, and other active methodologies may also preferentially benefit marginalized and historically underserved students

by facilitating a sense of mastery (Trujillo and Tanner) and by making the classroom environment less competitive (Hurtado et al.). Active and collaborative classroom activities are also associated with an “interdependent environment” (Fassinger). Such environments reduce anxiety by making class more predictable and by building social support and may be especially beneficial for first-generation students (Eddy and Hogan; Stephens et al.).

However, the formal structuring of reading comprehension may be the simplest and most well-founded mechanism of action by which these interventions improve equity in achievement. In fact, explicit instruction and support for reading was so important to the dramatic reduction in course failures (from 18 percent to 6 percent) demonstrated in one large study of an equity-based course redesign in biology that the authors declared it an “essential component” within such efforts (Freeman et al. 184). Nearly all of the most impactful interventions described in this literature replace assigned reading with more structured reading methods including activities (such as a summary or retelling), an instructional scaffold (such as a template to guide the students in how to read the assignment), and an accountability step (such as an online quiz, submitted reading “exercise,” or formal peer-sharing process).

Quantitative analyses of course redesigns featuring such changes demonstrate robust, positive impacts on direct measures of equity, including pass rates, final grades, and student engagement (e.g., Haak et al.; Freeman et al.; Ballen et al.). A biology course redesign featuring twice-weekly activities to “teach active reading”

improved performance for all students but especially for black and first-generation students (Eddy and Hogan). Related curricular redesigns reached similar conclusions (e.g., Ballen et al.; Sathy & Moore; Casper et al.; Connell et al.). Explicit reading instruction of this sort interrupts the impact of an implicit curriculum that favors the social capital of students from well-funded suburban schools who may have more background knowledge in their college subjects and more knowledge of how to study and read for them. This idea aligns with one of the most cited references in education research—Lisa Delpit’s notion that effective teachers of students of color explicitly teach the codes of power that school success depends on (Delpit). Because codes of power—such as how to read strategically—are not equitably available to all students before a course begins, explicitly providing them within the course structure preferentially benefits historically marginalized and underserved students in a direct manner, fostering equity in both resources and results.

Conceptual/Analytical Mechanisms of Action

In contrast to the direct and measurable orientation toward social justice described in practical approaches, Hytten and Bettez describe three strands or traditions of teaching for social justice that emphasize defining, illustrating, or explaining social justice. “Philosophical/conceptual” strands address “the meaning of justice in abstract, philosophical and/or theoretical terms” (10), while “ethnographic/narrative” approaches provide illustrative portraits of social justice or its absence. “Theoretically specific” approaches both explain and illustrate, but do so via particular analytical tools, such as critical pedagogy, queer theory, post-colonialism, or whiteness studies. Collectively, these approaches follow from both the traditional emphasis within liberal education upon freedom and civic engagement (e.g., Dewey), and the Freirean emphasis upon education as a tool for social justice. In our view, the mechanism of action by which these approaches bring about social justice is *conceptual/analytical*, because they depend upon students learning to understand and apply academic concepts and tools associated with social justice. Lee Anne Bell describes the logic of these orientations in this way:

The goal . . . is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (2)

Explicit instruction and scaffolded support for reading features strongly in these approaches to teaching for equity and social justice—many of which actually use the terms “literacy” and “reading” in their methodologies. The legal scholar Lani Guinier, for instance, argued in 2004 that progress toward racial equality depends on a paradigm shift away from “racial liberalism” and symbolic legal achievements such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and instead toward “racial literacy” or “the capacity to interpret the racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narrative of our republic” (100). While the notion of racial literacy has been critiqued

for reinscribing binary conceptions of racial awareness (Chávez-Moreno), a variety of scholars have more explicitly built upon the notion of racial and social justice analysis as a form of reading and have described the usefulness of college reading activities in helping students learn to understand and discuss race. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz has emphasized that, because race is “a signifier that is discursively constructed through language” (“Building Racial Literacy” 386), reading literature about race and other issues of social justice is an especially effective means of fostering racial literacy—especially in the FYW classroom.

Importantly, Sealey-Ruiz’s account makes clear that texts concerning race and racism cannot simply be assigned, because students need support and guidance

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in how to read and respond to such texts. Whereas Sealey-Ruiz used supportive class discussions and writing responses for this purpose, other scholars recommend more deliberate and scaffolded forms of reading support. Noting that “students’ racial literacy is predicated upon their ability to engage as critical readers of texts,” Emily Suh asserts that explicit support and instruction in reading in two-year colleges comprises a form of “raciolinguistic justice” that enhances reading and writing

skills while also helping students to critically engage “the very racialized world in which they live” (“Raciolinguistic” 117).

Suh’s notion of “teaching reading as raciolinguistic justice” shares with direct methods an attention to reading strategies as “codes of power.” Explaining that even the most engaging readings require support, she notes that “without having a clear understanding of the terminology used or the ideologies in play, our students cannot be expected to reap the benefits of texts so carefully selected for representation or for a strong social justice message” (117–18).

Yet the mechanism of action by which conceptual/analytical approaches advance social justice differs from direct methods in important ways. Whereas direct methods focus on the many social justice implications that follow from equity in grades, pass rates, and student-learning outcomes, conceptual/analytical approaches more generally prepare students for the critical work of understanding and analyzing racism and other forms of oppression—both in texts and in society. The frame of reference is not merely the classroom but can include the institution and larger society as well. Consequently, educational research within these traditions rarely mentions their impact upon student achievement. This doesn’t mean that such approaches aren’t pedagogically sound; in addition to providing instruction in skills and methods, for instance, the use of justice-themed texts and approaches has been demonstrated to communicate a sense of care and respect for marginalized students (Cridland-Hughes) that may “amplify students’ existing strengths” (Suh and Dyer 120), improving both their engagement and their learning.

Other conceptual/analytical approaches to teaching for social justice are quite “literally” methods of reading. Critical literacy approaches, for instance, guide readers in questioning the rhetorical and ideological assumptions that writers and readers bring to a text and the “social, political, and economic conditions under which those texts were constructed” (Beck 382). Critical literacy methods provide methods of reading that guide readers in looking inward to interrogate their own positionality and outward to ask whose interests and stories are represented and omitted in particular texts and what counternarratives should be considered in response to texts (e.g., Christensen; Vasquez et al.; McLaughlin and DeVogd).

More recently, Asao Inoue describes a four-step process college instructors can use to teach reading as an “antiracist practice.” He explains that such practices

ask readers not simply to think about what the text in front of them says, but how they come to understand that text in the ways they do. What social structures inform their personal ways of making sense of the text? In other words, what habits of language and judgment help a reader to read a text, where did the reader get those habits, and where do those habits come from in the world? What do they do in the world, or to the reader, by being used? Answering questions like these, I believe, helps readers understand in flexible ways their own habits of language and the inevitable politics they engage in when they read or use language. Answering questions like these about our habits of language as we read helps us do antiracist work by attending to the mind and language structures that structure us in a racist world. (134)

As the most recent innovation we found in our review of how reading instruction and support is used to advance social justice through conceptual/analytical mechanisms of action, Inoue’s method suggests an evolution in such approaches toward increasingly explicit uses of reading. That is, whereas reading instruction and support strategies were previously viewed as a way to make such approaches more accessible, they can now comprise the very essence of such approaches. Consequently, while always useful and beneficial to such approaches, explicit instruction and support for reading has evolved to be a *necessary* component of approaches to teaching for social justice and equity that assume conceptual/analytical mechanisms of action.

Empathetic Mechanisms of Action

Within Hytten and Bettez’s schemata of approaches to teaching for social justice, “democratically grounded” approaches focus on values, habits, skills, and knowledge “needed for thoughtful citizenship” (19). These approaches include an attention to ideas and concepts, such as the nature and value of democracy, and legal obligations to ensure the rights of others that may encourage individuals and communities to “disrupt oppression” and to “create social just institutions, policies, systems, and structures” (21). However, we find that the mechanism of action by which such approaches advance these goals is more powerfully *empathetic* than conceptual because it depends upon “a sense of responsibility toward others” (19) that, in turn, derives from an ability to understand and relate to the needs, emotions, and intentions of

people different from ourselves. This ability, which psychologists call “Theory of Mind” (ToM), has long been associated with empathy and pro-social behavior on behalf of others (Kidd and Castano 377). Importantly, a variety of research traditions suggest that the intellectual capacities that underlie ToM and other empathetic processes can be strengthened by reading.

Positive associations between reading and socio-emotional development have been demonstrated in systematic reviews and meta-analyses integrating research across

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the lifespan, including research on college students and quantitative, qualitative, and experimental approaches (e.g., Dodell-Feder and Tamir; Batini et al.; Hakemulder). These associations have recently been strengthened by neuroscientific brain-imaging research demonstrating that reading activates many of the same areas

of the brain that we use in real life, including those associated with emotions, ToM, and empathy (Oatley; Kidd and Castano). Neuroscientific research of this sort both helps explain long-standing demonstrations between reading and socio-emotional development and suggests that the influence of reading upon this development “has generally been underestimated by research” (Batini et al. 12).

Technically, it is not reading, per se, that is associated with this development but the “simulation of selves in interaction” that reading can entail (Oatley). This is most likely to occur when reading a text that “unsettles readers’ expectations” by including multiple voices and perspectives or by more generally cuing the “psychological processes needed to gain access to characters’ subjective experiences”—especially in contexts that challenge conventional expectations (Kidd and Castano 378). This speaks to the value of approaches to teaching for social justice that feature “multicultural literature, counter-narratives, or books with high socio-emotional contents” (Batini et al. 23). By disrupting expectations and pushing readers beyond reflexive or conventional judgments, such texts “may change how, not just what, people think about others” (Kidd and Castano 377). Key to the goals of teaching for social justice, literature of this sort has been hypothesized to foster *solidarity* as well as empathy (Hakemulder 97). In this way, reading—via empathetic mechanisms of action—may make possible a depth of psychological engagement with issues of social justice unavailable to conceptual/analytical approaches.

Popular literature—and most nonfiction—is not strongly associated with socio-emotional development or ToM. Consequently, the kind of pleasure reading most readers engage in on their own does not appear sufficient to advance social justice. This speaks to the importance of instructors who assign challenging, multicultural texts and who instruct and support their students in reading and responding to them. In this way, too, explicit instruction and scaffolded support for reading is a necessary component of teaching English and composition for social justice.

Conclusion

Accounts of the beneficial effects of explicit instruction and scaffolding of reading at the college level follow logically from long-standing demonstrations of the impact of reading instruction in K–12 schools. Child and adolescent reading ability is both positively and independently associated with a broad range of advantages and opportunities, including adult socio-economic status (SES), late-life cognitive functioning, and a wide variety of psychological benefits (Ritchie and Bates; Jefferson et al.; Batini et al.). While race, SES, and other variables strongly mediate school experiences, reading ability is especially important for vulnerable and underserved populations of students. In fact, for low SES students, and African Americans more generally, reading ability has consistently been shown to be more predictive of these benefits than even the number of years of education a student achieves (Dotson et al.). In this sense, we were not surprised to find that explicit instruction and scaffolded support for reading comprised a practical and direct means of pursuing social justice and equity in student learning outcomes in introductory college courses. Gloria Ladson-Billings's assertion that the first criteria of culturally relevant teaching is that students must experience academic success was among the foundational principles we considered in our seminar. Nevertheless, we were startled by the detail and extent to which this literature

demonstrates that the status quo classroom—and college more generally—can be part of the problem. Clearly, this status quo features classrooms in which reading is assigned but not taught or supported. Moreover, while grades, pass rates, and other measures may oversimplify descriptions of student success in two-year institutions (Sullivan et al.), we were both challenged and inspired by research demonstrations of the “practical” use of reading instruction as a means of interrupting previous inequities and of pursuing equity in educational achievement and opportunity.

However, the kind of guided, preparatory reading assignments recommended in this literature generally derive from directed-reading thinking activities (Stauffer; Tierney), which comprise one of the most recommended and studied approaches within research on reading comprehension. While pleased to see reading methods feature so strongly in this college success literature, we cannot help but wonder how much more impactful such efforts could be if informed by more contemporary approaches, such as reading apprenticeships (Hogan), metacognitive strategies, and approaches that are less conventional (e.g., Gabay) or which more formally build on the strengths and assets diverse students bring with them to class (e.g., Gallagher and Messer). To these ends, we urge FYW and English Education teacher-scholars to 1) contribute to this growing literature and 2) to more explicitly recognize research

We were both challenged and inspired by research demonstrations of the “practical” use of reading instruction as a means of interrupting previous inequities and of pursuing equity in educational achievement and opportunity.

efforts to improve equity in student achievement as research on teaching for social justice. Prior to the work that led to this article, the approaches that came to mind when we thought about teaching for social justice were largely *conceptual/analytical* in orientation. Now, having studied direct and empathetic approaches, we “see” research on teaching for social justice in a more grounded, expansive, and inclusive manner. Direct mechanisms of action, for instance, are literally woven into TETYC’s dual emphasis on theoretical and practical articles and the nature of two-year colleges as “social justice institutions” (Sullivan).

Conversely, we were surprised and pleased to find explicit instruction and scaffolded support for reading to be so essentially tied to approaches to teaching for

It reminded us that teaching for social justice is a matter of the heart as well as the mind.

social justice that do depend upon *conceptual/analytical* mechanisms of action. Most scholarship that explicitly references “social justice” within the teaching of FYW and English clearly depends on this mechanism of action. This is evident in the frequency of references within FYW

and English Education to the many “theoretically specific” approaches Hytten and Bettez place within such approaches, including critical literacy, critical pedagogy, post-colonialism, cultural studies, critical theory, feminism, whiteness studies, and queer theory. However, because “our ability to develop students’ racial literacy is predicated upon their ability to engage as critical readers of texts” (Suh, “Raciolinguistic” 117), we can’t simply assign texts in these traditions and expect to be teaching for social justice. As we have demonstrated here, how well our students engage with, learn from, and draw upon such texts depends upon the explicit instruction and support we provide for reading them.

Similarly, we were both instructed and delighted to find that neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, and experimental psychologists now affirm what we have always known: that the kinds of texts our classrooms are known for—texts that “unsettle readers’ expectations and challenge their thinking”—may “reduce the strangeness of others” and foster the kind of empathy and perspective taking that leads to action on behalf of others (Kidd and Castano 377). Representative of the order by which we have structured this article, we studied the research on reading and empathy after reviewing the reading research on practical and conceptual/analytical approaches; after so much time with experimental and theoretical research on teaching for social justice, we found the attention to emotion and values in the research on reading and empathy to be comforting, even humanizing. In non-academic terms, it reminded us that teaching for social justice is a matter of the heart as well as the mind and, in this way, brought us back to the thoughts, experiences, people, and feelings that led us all to want to become teachers.

According to Ayers et al., teaching for social justice requires a foundation of three interlocking orientations: equity, activism, and a social literacy grounded in “nourishing connections” to others. In this sense—and fitting the goals of an integrative review—the approaches we have viewed here are complementary parts

of a larger, holistic approach. While they function via separate mechanisms of action, they collectively describe the role and importance of explicit instruction and scaffolded support for reading as one answer to the question of how best to teach for social justice. ◀

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