

## **From the Voices of Teachers: Envisioning Social Justice Teacher Leadership through Portraits of Practice**

**Jon Mundorf**

*University of Florida, U.S.A.*

**Blake Beckett**

*University of Florida, U.S.A.*

**Shelby Boehm**

*University of Florida, U.S.A.*

**Christina Flake**

*University of Florida, U.S.A.*

**Cody Miller**

*College at Brockport, State University of New York., U.S.A.*

Drawing on theories of “radical pragmatism,” this article situates the experiences and reflections of four teacher leaders at a K-12 public school to develop aspects of teacher leadership acts that are rooted in a social justice disposition. This article marries frequently established ideas and acts of teacher leadership with social justice education. By doing so, we argue that teacher leadership is neither neutral nor apolitical; teacher leadership, like teaching itself, either works to challenge inequities in schools or replicate them. Collectively, these portraits demonstrate how the theoretical aspects of social justice education are realized in the daily realities of teacher leaders.

### **Introduction**

Wenner and Campbell (2017), in their literature review of teacher leadership scholarship, criticize the field for largely ignoring issues of social justice and equity. This neglect of the roles societal inequities play in shaping the material realities of schools has implications for both research and practice. What would a model of teacher leadership rooted in social justice education look like? What would socially just teacher leadership practices entail? As current or former classroom teachers with experiences ranging from elementary to higher education, we took on many roles that were deemed by our administrators as “teacher leadership.” Our time in those roles reflected our social justice teaching orientation. Our own experiences could tell stories of social justice teacher leadership. Thus, in this article we look to our experiences as teacher leaders striving towards socially just classrooms and schools to fill in the gap left by the research on teacher leadership.

We first want to note that we are not suggesting the idea of teachers working for societal change has never been studied or documented. In fact, the history of teachers acting as change agents within their schools and society has a deep history in the United States. For instance, Black educators in the Jim Crow south acted as “secret social justice advocates” (Smathers Library Gallery, 2018) and LGBTQ teachers fought the National Education Association to have a basic voice and structure in the union (Graves, 2015). Contemporarily, the movement to

#DisruptTexts (Ebarvia, Germán, Parker, Torres, 2018), teach-ins at the United States-Mexico border (Camera, 2019), and mass organizing for teacher walkouts (Catte & Salfia, 2018) all represent teachers fighting injustices to create a just tomorrow inside and outside the classroom. And those three examples are not exhaustive. Rather, we are specifically drawing on language and scholarship of teacher leadership to situate our work and offer portraits of how teacher leadership could be imagined when explicitly married to social justice education.

We construct four portraits from our own practice in this article. The portraits we offer provide concrete manifestations of our conceptualization of teacher leadership founded on social justice education. After offering four different portraits of practice from four different teacher leaders, we then discuss themes across the portraits to suggest insights for teacher leadership scholarship and practice. The portraits, taken from four of the five authors' teaching experiences, are a response to educator José Vilson's (2017) call for teachers to see themselves as experts:

The most powerful work I've seen in this space is when an adult puts a spotlight on the joys and injustices our students experience, and then speak with clarity on the moments and moves they make to give students hope and love.

The four portraits and succeeding analysis offer a vision of teacher leadership rooted in justice, hope, and love.

### **Teacher Leaders as Radical Pragmatist: School Change for Social Justice**

Despite its often-praised potential for school change, concepts of teacher leadership have largely avoided concern about social justice education (Gershon, 2012; Jacobs & Croswell, 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017), opting instead to focus on managerial aspects of schools such as oversight and scheduling (Harris, 2005; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2000; Muijs & Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, when left unchallenged, organizational responsibilities like scheduling, organizing professional development, and purchasing curriculum are sites in which oppression is replicated. School change, long seen as an aim of teacher leadership, is not inherently change for equity and justice. Indeed, scholars lauded for their work in school change like Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) neglect to include social justice as a worthy analysis in their conceptions of change and leadership. Our framework, and succeeding portraits, marry the familiar aspects of teacher leadership to a social justice disposition (Alsup & Miller, 2014) to offer visions of school change for social justice. We echo Theoharis' (2009) argument that leadership not "focused on and successful at creating more just and equitable schools for marginalized students is indeed not good leadership" (p. 159). Conceptualizations of teacher leadership and school change without a social justice disposition lack both leadership and meaningful change.

Our understanding of teacher leaders working for social justice education draws on scholarship relating to activism (Collins, 1998; Postman & Weingartner, 1970) and social justice education (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Fine, 2015; Minor, 2019, Sleeter & Carmona, 2016). We avoid narrowing depictions of social justice education to massive protests that draw attention from the public. Those acts, while vital for schools and democracy at-large, are not the only enactments of social justice education teacher leaders can take. Teacher leaders can work as "soft revolutionaries" (Postman & Weingarten, 1970) and "radical pragmatists" (Duncan-

Andrade & Morrell, 2008) within school systems to fundamentally change schools, even if the change is incremental.

Postman and Weingartner (1970)'s concept of "soft revolutionaries" demonstrates how individuals can work within systems to make changes for justice. Soft revolutionaries look for specific problems to address in order to create "profound changes, where possible" and "simple improvements" when large-scale systemic modifications aren't yet achievable, with the belief that making enough small changes over time can eventually lead to a new system (p. 4). Extending from the work of Postman and Weingartner, Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, and Hodgins (2008) imagine soft revolutionaries as educators who learn "informal and formal systems of the school and district" to enact social justice education within said systems (p. 399). Minor (2019), specifically working from the perspective of K-12 schools, offers a similar model by noting that the results of enacting social justice education within current school structures is "more evolutionary than it is revolutionary" and that changes made "won't be radically different right away, but they can be incrementally better" (p. 131). Minor (2019) wants teachers to envision themselves as "agents with the vision to imagine new systems – even if they exist only in our individual classrooms or departments for now" (p. 115).

Similarly, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) call for educators to be "radical pragmatist(s)" who wear a "radical hat" along with a "pragmatic hat." The former hat allows for educators to imagine a more just future while the latter hat allows for educators to acknowledge their current socio-political landscape (p. 167). Educators must acknowledge and navigate their current realities to make incremental change that can lead to institutional change. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' (1998) concept of "visionary pragmatism," emerging from scholarship on Black feminism, offers an effective middle between "visionary thinking" and "pragmatic action" (p. 188). Collins' concept is informative for school change, for social justice as visionary thinking can be too theoretical or radical to be useful to "everyday people and their lives" while an inability to see beyond today's unjust reality can "offer little hope" (p. 188). Sleeter and Carmona (2016) found Collins' concept to be important in thinking about K-12 school systems, suggesting that visionary pragmatists "reach for what may seem unattainable, seeking ways to turn the impossible into the possible" (pp. 167-168). These scholars all suggest that radical change can be made within institutions through incremental and tenacious commitment.

Lasting and large-scale change for social justice within school systems does not happen instantly. Such change requires understanding the current realities of schools but not believing those realities are impervious. Through a radical pragmatic approach to teacher leadership and social justice education, we offer vignettes that illustrate how new realities can be forged through working within existing school structures.

### **Portraits of Practice**

In the following section we outline four portraits of practice from four of the authors' own teaching experiences. Each portrait was written by the individual teacher leader before being placed in conversation with the other portraits. The authors selected a moment from their practice that they believed embodied their teacher leadership acts from a social justice perspective. All four portraits reflect the experiences of white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied teachers whose first language is English. These identities reflect dominant identities within schools and society at-large and thus come with social and institutional privileges. Additionally, the homogeneous nature of the teachers presents a limitation to this piece. All

authors worked together as teachers at a K-12 public laboratory school affiliated with a major southeastern university's education college. The portraits were written from the perspective of the individual teacher to center their experiences in the narrative.

### **Portrait One: Building Community Coalitions for Dyslexic Students**

As an elementary teacher focused on early literacy for many years, I was part of systems working to support students who experienced challenges in learning to read and write. I invested much time and money in my own learning, including earning a master's degree in reading and writing and becoming a trained Reading Recovery teacher. Reading Recovery is an intensive data-driven intervention delivered to first grade students who are working below grade level expectations in reading and writing. The teachers received specialized training to work for thirty minutes each day with students, with the goal of helping students achieve grade level expectations in twenty weeks. However, it was my role as a parent which sharpened my lens to better see where the systems were falling short. It was the close relationship I had with my son which allowed me to see beyond his data points and his homework packets to witness how his sense of self and confidence were slowly being damaged by well-intentioned systems during his kindergarten year. I ached for the many students whom I had worked with throughout the years whose silent suffering I had not fully understood.

While I was shocked by the ineffectiveness of the Response to Intervention (RTI) system to help identify my son's dyslexia, I was equally surprised to see that most classroom teachers did not know much about dyslexia or how to work with students who were struggling to read and write. The RTI system is designed to identify students who are struggling, implement interventions to support them to achieve grade level expectations, and use data to evaluate their progress. If students do not respond to interventions, they may eventually be screened for learning differences. Students like my son are not typically supported by the RTI system until they produce failing grades or test scores, and I had an instinct it would take years for that to occur, during which my son would infer there was something wrong with him. After spending my own money to have a private school psychologist identify my son's dyslexia and quickly working with his school to create a 504 plan to grant my son the extended time he would need on tests throughout his school career, I reflected on my privilege as a middle-class white woman and how I was wielding it. I needed to extend my efforts beyond my son, and advocate for any student in any classroom.

I started by educating myself about issues of dyslexia. Words matter, and I began to use words to help repair my son's sense of self and confidence. My husband and I read and discussed several books about dyslexia. We talked them over with our son. We were honest about dyslexia and how it made reading and writing more challenging but also helped our son think differently and creatively. We researched people with dyslexia and talked about how their dyslexia offered them gifts as well as challenges. We moved through emotions from worry to serious work to laughter as my son noticed some of his reading and writing errors through a relaxed lens of his new understanding of himself.

I wanted to share our experiences and learning with other parents and children in hopes of bringing them some relief, so I founded a support group for families with children with dyslexia. I advertised through email and always asked people to spread the word. For three years I planned and hosted meetings three or four times each school year; our attendance varied with our largest meeting having twenty-six attendees and our smallest having two. We watched movies and read books about dyslexia, and interacted with experts from the community

including guidance counselors, public school special education specialists, and administrators. Some of us brought our children and some did not. My son did not participate often, but he was at every meeting and I know he was surprised to see there were kids like him. In hindsight, I believe the adults benefitted from this same support. We shared our stories of heartache and success, we listened, and were relieved to not be so alone.

One of our most successful meetings focused on a panel of current university students with dyslexia who talked with families about navigating K-12 systems as well as applying to and attending college. A ten-year old who was in this meeting with his mom told her on the way home that he was surprised to see people “just like me” going to college. That meeting led to a mentor relationship between that child and one of the university students which changed the way that child viewed himself and his future. He never before considered college to be within his grasp and had been holding his school experiences at arm’s length. He was surviving a well-intentioned environment which often did not meet his needs. His mentor taught him to advocate for himself in school and see his future in a new way.

Children and families are not always supported by our school systems for a myriad of reasons from differences in ability to other aspects of our identity such as race and gender. As people, we want to see others “just like us” and be seen and supported for who we are. It is going to take large and small shifts in our systems to make room for all students and families. Centering our students and their voices will help guide this work. As I continue to work as a middle school language arts teacher, I strive to do this both within my classroom as well as beyond its walls.

### **Portrait Two: Co-constructing Critical Literacy Curriculum**

In her article discussing the tensions of teachers enacting critical literacy practices, Rogers (2014) concludes by emphasizing, “part of teacher learning includes disrupting old patterns of thought and integrating new” (p. 257). This statement explains the struggle I felt discovering my teacher leader identity within schools that consistently repeated the “we’ve always done it this way” adage. Regardless of what old pattern *it* was, the merging of critical literacy theory and my practice ultimately resulted in the development of a critical stance to understand and the language to negotiate the dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed both within and beyond my classroom walls (Freire, 2018).

As a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, I worked to disrupt the old patterns of thought Rogers (2014) speaks of by embracing critical literacy theory within my pedagogy through including students in the formal development of a unit plan. I recognize critical literacy as a continuous process for guiding students to read the word and the world in a manner that prompts critical questioning and leads to cultural awareness followed by civic engagement (Shor, 1999; Freire, 2018). This work has also meant developing my understanding of what Seward (2019) describes as decolonizing the English language arts classroom. Denouncing and challenging institutions built and sustained by Whiteness, like other critical literacy practices, requires frequent reflecting, questioning, and acting in response to power hierarchies. Much of this work requires interrogating the curriculum to question who and what is or is not included and thus affirmed in academic spaces (Harris, 2007). In his 2018 song “Brackets,” J. Cole (2018) posits the necessity for critical literacy and educators reckoning with their positionality in a space where every decision, curriculum or otherwise, is political:

Maybe 'cause the tax dollars that I make sure I send  
Get spent hirin' some teachers that don't look like them  
And the curriculum be trickin' em, them dollars I spend  
Got us learning about the heroes with the whitest of skin  
One thing about the men that's controlling the pen  
That write history, they always seem to white-out they sins

Like many teachers, I previously developed a curriculum by considering what I believed was relevant to my students' interests. As I began to learn more about critical literacy theory, the idea of relevance felt problematic. Luke's (2012) foundational questions depict how an idea like relevance can be nuanced when considered through a critical literacy framework, especially as it pertains to knowledge construction: "What is 'truth'? How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests? Who should have access to which images and words, texts, and discourses? For what purposes?" (p. 4). These questions prompted me to reflect on how I could reposition my power by formally allocating academic space for others. Rethinking my curriculum, both in the development process and content, seemed logical. This led to an intentional shift to include students in the formal design and implementation of a unit plan in my high school English classroom. Rather than assume what was relevant, I wanted to include students in the decision-making process. As a teacher leader rooted in social justice, I aimed to affirm students through recognition of their literacies and partner with them through the deconstruction of curriculum as an oppressive system.

To begin this work, I asked students to consider what they found interesting and valuable to study. At the time, students were overwhelmingly curious about a recently released documentary film, *Homecoming: A film by Beyoncé* (2019). The concert film, produced by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, showcases her historic performance at the 2018 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. Once *Homecoming* was overwhelmingly chosen by students as the central text, students brought in questions and additional resources such as social media posts, articles, song lyrics, young adult novels, and student-authored spoken word poetry to critically examine *Homecoming* and how power is gained, utilized, and justified.

It is worth noting that although this unit development work aimed to be liberatory, the unit succumbed to priorities and thus power hierarchies shaped by high-stakes standardized testing; the unit of study focused on the narrative genre that goes untested on the state assessment and was taught at the end of the year once aforementioned testing was over. Yet, the act of centering students in the curriculum development process affirmed their interests and curiosities while disrupting traditional methods of who gets to develop curriculum. This curriculum was relevant to students because it was created by them. As a teacher leader, the most important work I do often involves stepping aside.

### **Portrait Three: Developing an LGBTQ-Affirming Pedagogy**

It doesn't take a top-down approach to make a difference in students' lives - help can come from a single educator (Minero, 2018). So often I have found my passionate drive for justice stifled by the enormity of the work. I lose sight of the fact that each year I have the opportunity to impact hundreds of children that will walk into my 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom, the opportunity to share the work I am doing with my colleagues, and the opportunity to share my work with others worldwide through social media and publications. It is through these very avenues that I have had my own thinking disrupted, causing me to reflect and redesign

my curricula and instructional practices. It was thirteen years into my career as an educator that I had my thinking disrupted for the first time. In a new school district, on a new campus I received an invitation from a colleague to attend a professional learning session he was offering titled, “Affirming LGBTQ Students and Families in K-12 Settings.” My desire to attend this session stemmed from my upbringing, my prior experiences as an educator, and my heart for justice.

I grew up in an impoverished rural town in the deep south where my family struggled for work, food, housing, and clothing. Even with these challenges, I still benefited from white, cisgender, heterosexual privilege compared to my peers of color, my peers whose sexual orientation was different than the society’s heteronormative ideals, or my peers whose gender expression differed from the gender they were assigned at birth. I watched as they were ignored by teachers in class. I watched as they were bullied day in and day out. I watched and my heart ached for them but I did not say a word. When I did speak up, I got called homophobic and racist slurs. In that rural town in the deep south, us white, cisgender folks were told we were supposed to “stick to our own kind.” I felt as if I was fighting a battle I could not win because I was outnumbered but more so because I was ill-equipped with the knowledge I needed to be an ally and an advocate. After becoming the first in my family to receive a college degree, I returned to that rural town in the deep south to start my career in education. It was as if nothing had changed so I vowed to be the change for all children, not just the children who looked like me. I worked to create an environment where everyone would feel loved, feel safe, feel valued, and know they could be a successful learner no matter what they looked like or who they loved. At the time I didn’t know that I was missing an important piece to my quest for inclusivity.

The professional learning session on affirming LGBTQ students led by my colleague proved to be the answer I had been searching for since I was young; it empowered me with the knowledge to be an ally who was truly inclusive. I learned that by offering mostly heteronormative perspectives, schools not only fail to take a proactive stance towards homophobia (Blackburn & Clark, 2011) but also support a type of hidden curriculum which denies positive representations about diverse sexuality and gender (Sears, 1991). I was determined that in our fourth and fifth grade English Language Arts (ELA) combination class, there would be LGBTQ representation within children’s text, that all students would become familiar with terminology associated with sexuality and gender, and our classroom would be a safe space for everyone. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that in schools where students report usage of an inclusive curriculum, LGBTQ students feel safer, are absent less, and feel more connected to their schools; they also feel more accepted by their peers (2011).

I feel that as ELA teachers we have a unique opportunity to make a difference in the lives of LGBTQ students and to help stem the tide of harassment, violence, depression, and other issues often experienced by LGBTQ learners through literature instruction (Page, 2017). So, as an elementary teacher, I decided to introduce my students to *George* by Alex Gino (2015) which is a story about a fourth-grade transgender student. When I began planning our unit, I learned that eighth grade students were doing a research project for their ELA class and one of the students wanted to explore the impact of teaching elementary age students about sexuality and gender. This student and I met together and planned out questions that she would ask prior to the lesson, during the lesson, and reflection questions for after the lesson. We also planned out activities she would use to introduce the students to the terminology associated with sexuality and gender. She then read two chapters of the book aloud to students, stopping to have the students discuss George’s thoughts, feelings, and actions and how they impacted George and

how they impacted those around her. Finally, the lesson ended with a personal reflection through Google Forms that asked the students:

1. On a scale of one to five, with one being the least comfortable and five being the most comfortable, how comfortable were you with talking about sexuality and gender before today's lesson? Why did you feel this way?
2. On a scale of one to five, with one being the least comfortable and five being the most comfortable, how comfortable were you with learning about sexuality and gender before today's lesson? Why did you feel this way?
3. On a scale of one to five, with one being the least comfortable and five being the most comfortable, after today's lesson how comfortable are you with talking about sexuality and gender? Why did you feel this way?
4. On a scale of one to five, with one being the least comfortable and five being the most comfortable, after today's lesson how comfortable are you with learning about sexuality and gender? Why did you feel this way?
5. In what ways did your thinking change as a result of today's lesson?

When we analyzed this data together at the end of the day, we found out that prior to beginning the lesson students were eager to learn about sexuality and gender, but were scared to talk about it because they didn't know how to talk about it. Students also expressed a high level of comfort with learning about and discussing this topic. The responses about how their thinking had changed after the lesson were phenomenal. The eighth-grade student and I were blown away by the positive, authentic responses from the class. The eighth-grader shared that she was surprised by how open and willing to learn the students were. She expressed such excitement about the insights gained from this experience and the idea that this would be the beginning of a transformation in the elementary curriculum to be more LGBTQ inclusive.

With eagerness I shared my experience with my grades 4/5 colleagues. However, I was met with a lot of uncertainty and a lack of enthusiasm by most. I even received a text from my principal questioning my text selection, the appropriateness of the vocabulary and conversation, and if I had sent home a letter to parents to make them aware of our "controversial" topic. With support from my colleague, I responded to her explaining that framing a book that features LGBTQ characters as "controversial" places the onus of conflict on LGBTQ people. There is nothing controversial or problematic about being a member of the LGBTQ community (Miller, 2019). While no other teacher in my learning community felt inspired to include LGBTQ representation within their current curricula, one of my colleagues did seek to ensure that as we planned for our human growth and development unit that it was of the utmost importance to ensure that the language and content was inclusive for our LGBTQ students and/or families.

Despite whether others changed their practice or not, I wanted LGBTQ students to feel safe, connected, valued, and accepted so it became common practice for us to analyze and discuss LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ representations in multiple texts and formats. Despite not having all the answers, I choose to be an ally and an advocate who shares her journey in hopes of doing what my colleague did for me: empowering and equipping me for action against injustice. Lastly, understanding the importance of centering students and their cultures in my classroom, I began including students – both within the grade I teach and across grade-levels that represent different cultures – when designing learning to meet the needs of all students.



---

### **Portrait Four: Challenging Silences and Single Stories**

Clint Smith's (2014) "The Danger of Silence" and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2014) "The Danger of a Single Story," both TED Talks, provide my students with conceptual frameworks for critically thinking about power, narratives, and curriculum. These frameworks have been invaluable in having students analyze the curriculum of their past and present classrooms. The concept of "silence" supports me in having students analyze whose stories are missing from curriculum (Smith, 2014) while the concept of "single stories" (Adichie, 2014) supports me in having students analyze what types of stories are told in curriculum.

Smith (2014) argues in his video that silences about injustices happen because "We spend so much time listening to the things people are saying that we rarely pay attention to the things they don't." After showing them his video, I ask my students to reflect on the things schools don't say: What topics are not discussed? Whose voices are not heard? What types of texts are not read? Adichie (2009) contends in her video that "stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize." After hearing this, I ask my students to reflect on how schools replicate dominant and often times marginalizing narratives: Who writes the stories? Who benefits from the stories? Who is missing from the stories?

Framing curricula around the concepts of silences and single stories for my students has been an effective pedagogical decision for helping them analyze how curricula can "act as an injustice-perpetuating mechanism" (Dyches, 2018, p. 236). Unintentionally, teachers (including myself) tend to perpetuate single stories when we limit students' curricular and reading experiences. It is important for teachers to provide students with the opportunities to amend curricular injustices (after supporting students in naming said injustices) because I want my students to see themselves as capable of making changes within and outside of their school.

Therefore, last school year I began one of my instructional units by having my students unpack their understandings and memories of hearing the "first Thanksgiving story." Students drew on their family stories and experiences from elementary school and their retellings focused on a story of European colonists working alongside the Wampanoag to prepare a harvest feast celebrating their newfound friendship. I then introduced students to the concept of "dominant narrative" and used students' anecdotes of the Thanksgiving story as an example of how dominant narrative can impact our thinking. Following this activity, my students read articles which centered Native experiences and voices, then watched the PBS documentary *We Shall Remain*, a multi-media project that establishes Native history as an essential part of American history, to examine how the dominant narrative of Thanksgiving silences Native history.

Students in my class were then asked to use similar Native-centered resources to learn about specific events in history. Students studied Tecumseh, a Shawnee leader and chief, and his vision for an independent Indian state, the Trail of Tears, and Geronimo, an Apache leader, and his resistance to westward expansion by the United States. After curating resources, studying Native perspectives, and learning about these events and time periods, students examined their US History textbooks for their chosen topic to find how the textbook addressed these events. As students saw their topics reduced to a two-page spread with a few maps (Trail of Tears), two paragraphs (Tecumseh), and a single mention of Geronimo, they wrote about the implications of this narrow retelling of history. Students reflected on their own understandings of Native history and confronted the realization that their perspective on Native identity was seeped in the past due to dominant representation from media as well as a lack of representation in the K-12 curriculum. A desire to learn more about modern Native experiences emerged and my class selected *Looks Like Daylight: Voices of Indigenous Kids* (Ellis, 2013), as well as other similar

texts, to move beyond the tendency in K-12 curriculum and discourse of reducing the rich and complex experiences of Native people into a single story (Reese, 2007; Reese, 2018).

My goal was to support students in challenging single stories and silences about Native experiences in curriculum. The process which I engaged students in can be applied to any historically marginalized group. My students' curation of their own text sets allowed them to correct a curricular injustice and create material for future teachers to include. Finally, students saw the importance of centering marginalized voices in texts by naming and honoring #OwnVoices (Duyvis, 2015) in the classroom.

Students are curious and want to know the full story of any historical event. Tom Rademacher, @MrTomRad on Twitter, (2019) recently tweeted that conversations about racism in his English class prompted the questions, "Why are we learning this in language arts class?" and "Why haven't we ever learned about this before?" Rademacher notes that the latter question answers the former. These questions, now common among my students as well, speak to the ways silences and single stories deny all students the right to a fuller view of humanity.

### **Looking Across the Portraits**

The four portraits outlined in the previous section offer concrete examples of the theoretical orientation we outlined earlier in the article. From these four portraits, we constructed themes to envision common attributes of a teacher leadership model rooted in a social justice stance. We outline and develop the themes in the following section. Then, in the succeeding section we connect the portraits and themes we've developed to the body of scholarship dedicated to teacher leadership.

### **Understanding Oppression Across School Contexts**

All four teachers had to first understand how forms of oppression manifest in various school contexts before they could lead to challenge those forms of oppressive forces. In portraits one and three, *Building Community Coalitions for Dyslexic Students* and *Developing an LGBTQ-Affirming Pedagogy*, teachers needed to understand how ableism and homo- and transphobia, respectively, operate within the school systems the teachers taught in. In portraits two and four, *Co-constructing Critical Literacy Curriculum* and *Challenging Silences and Single Stories*, the teachers needed to understand how canonical knowledge that is venerated and reproduced in schools is the production of unequal power dynamics that are cultural, historical, and political. The teachers could not lead for social justice if they did not have the conceptual language to understand and name injustices.

### **Sharing Power with Students**

Challenging power dynamics within school systems is a vital part of social justice teacher leadership. In all four examples, students were positioned to share power with their teachers rather than adhere to the established power structures. For instance, students' experiences and knowledges were seen as crucial for challenging ableist school procedures and policies in the first portrait while students' own textual consumptions were used to push against racist curricular material in the second portrait. A middle school student constructed curriculum with a teacher in the third portrait to bring visibility to LGBTQ narratives in elementary classrooms, as the teacher shared their knowledge of curriculum writing for their contexts with the student to create a lesson on *George* (Gino, 2015) and discuss sexuality and gender identity. All of these examples

speak to the ways in which power structures that place students as passive entities and teacher as the only active entities can be challenged and reimagined.

All four authors have begun to better understand their own power, whether the power be in communities or classrooms, and worked to share their power with their students. The teachers provided the navigational language for the students in sharing power. The teacher in portrait three shared the structure of lesson plans that was approved by the school so the middle school student could adhere to the institution’s rules while creating LGBTQ-affirming curriculum. Similarly, the teacher in the second portrait shared the language of curriculum and pedagogy with high school students so the high school students could speak to texts from their own lives in the “teacher language” of the institution. Finally, the teacher in the fourth portrait taught their students how to critically analyze curriculum so students could co-construct and co-deconstruct the school curriculum collectively.

### **Connections to Teacher Leadership Scholarship**

To offer a vision of teacher leadership rooted in a social justice disposition (Alsup & Miller, 2014), we critically examine facets that are commonly associated with teacher leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2000; Muijs & Harris, 2003) and reorient them to center issues of power and justice. Then we use examples from the four portraits to offer concrete examples of the theoretical. Table 1 below outlines a vision of teacher leadership envisioned with the goals of social justice education:

**Table 1**

*Facets of Teacher Leadership with a Social Justice Orientation*

<b>Facets of Teacher Leadership (Katzenmeyer &amp; Moller, 2000; Muijs &amp; Harris, 2003)</b>	<b>Facets of Teacher Leadership with a Social Justice Orientation</b>
<i>Leadership of students and other teachers through mentoring, coaching, developing curriculum, leading professional learning groups</i>	Leadership of students and other teachers in naming systemic injustices and challenging such injustices both inside and outside of school  Examples from portraits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positioning students as co-creators of the classroom curriculum</li> <li>● Developing curriculum that centers historically marginalized voices and experiences</li> <li>● Supporting teachers in understanding ableism through meeting structures outside of the school</li> </ul>

**Table 1 (continued)**

*Facets of Teacher Leadership with a Social Justice Orientation*

<b>Facets of Teacher Leadership (Katzenmeyer &amp; Moller, 2000; Muijs &amp; Harris, 2003)</b>	<b>Facets of Teacher Leadership with a Social Justice Orientation</b>
<i>Leadership of operational tasks</i> to support the school in fulfilling its mission statement or vision	Leadership of operational tasks that are concerned with unearthing and amending institutional inequities within the school  Examples from portraits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Working to analyze gaps and fill said gaps in school structures like Response to Intervention</li></ul>
<i>Leadership through decision-making or partnerships</i> with school advisory board members, parent/teacher organizations, community and local businesses, and higher education institutions	Leadership through decision-making that is rooted in a social justice disposition and rejects hierarchies within institutions and partnerships  Examples from portraits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Founding of a dyslexia advocacy group with community members</li><li>• Bringing in community knowledge through co-construction of the curriculum to honor students' and their families experiences and knowledges</li></ul>

**Conclusion**

We opened up this piece noting that we were drawn to José Vilson's (2017) call for teachers to see themselves as experts. Responding to his call in this article has also allowed us to challenge the gaps in teacher leadership scholarship that ignore social justice education (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). It is our hope that other teachers find value in the ways we outlined and analyzed our own stories. More importantly, we hope that other teachers can use this article as a model for thinking about and writing about their own practices in ways that embody social justice teacher leadership. Vilson (2017) urged teachers to embrace their knowledge and respond to the urgency of our time: "When given a platform, the best of us can look at the rest of the society eye-to-eye, feet firmly planted, and let truth sprout from within." We have sprouted our truths. We hope to join in a chorus of truths.

## References

- Adichie, C.N. (2009). The danger of a single story [Video]. *TEDGlobal*. Retrieved from [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)
- Alsop, J., & Miller, S. (2014). Reclaiming English education: Rooting social justice in dispositions. *English Education*, 46(3), 195-215.
- Blackburn, M.V., & Clark, C. T. (2011). Becoming readers of literature with LGBTQ themes: In and out of classrooms. In Wolfe, S.A. Coats, K., Enciso, P., & Jenkins, C.A. (Eds.), *Handbook of research on children's and young adult literature* (pp. 148-163). New York: Routledge.
- Camera, L. (2019, Jan 18). A lesson in protest. *U.S. News*. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2019-01-18/teacher-of-the-year-organizes-protest-in-support-of-detained-immigrant-children>.
- Catte, E., & Salfia, J. (2018). *55 strong: Inside the West Virginia teachers' strike*. Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing.
- Cole, J. L. (2018). Brackets. On *KOD*[CD]. Dreamville Records.
- Collins, P.H. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Duyvis, C. (2015, Sep. 06). #OwnVoices. Corinne Duyvis: Sci-fi & fantasy in MG & YA. Retrieved from <http://www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/>.
- Ebarvia, T., Germán, L., Parker, K., & Torres, J. (2018). What is #DisruptTexts? *#DisruptTexts*. Retrieved from <https://disrupttexts.org/lets-get-to-work/>.
- Ellis, D. (2013). *Looks like daylight: Voices of indigenous kids*. Toronto, Canada & Berkeley, CA: Groundwood Books / House of Anansi Press.
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 50th anniversary edition*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing. (Original work published 1970).
- Gershon, W. (2012). Leading for social justice in teacher education. In C. Boske & S. Diem (Eds.), *Global leadership for social justice: Taking it from field to practice* (pp. 139-157). Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Gino, A. (2015). *George*. New York: Scholastic.

- GLSEN. (2011). *Teaching respect: LGBT-inclusive curriculum and school climate* (Research brief). New York, NY: GLSEN.
- Graves, K. (2015). LGBTQ education research in historical context. In G.L. Wimberly (Ed.), *LGBTQ issues in education: Advancing a research agenda* (pp. 23-42). Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Harris, A. (2005). Teacher leadership: More than just a feel-good factor? *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 4*, 201-219.
- Harris, V. J. (2007). In praise of a scholarly force: Rudine Sims Bishop. *Language Arts, 85*(2), 153.
- Jacobs, J., & Crowell, L. (2016). Developing as teacher leaders for social justice: The influence of a teacher leadership graduate program. *The New Educator, 14*(4), 1-27.
- Katzenmeyer, M., & Moller, G. (2009). *Awakening the sleeping giant: Helping teachers develop as leaders* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Knowles-Carter, B. (Producer). & Knowles-Carter, B. (Director). (2019). *Homecoming: a film by Beyoncé* [Motion picture]. United States: Netflix.
- Luke, A. (2012). Critical Literacy: Foundational Notes. *Theory into Practice, 51*(1), 4–11.
- Minero, E. (2018, April 19). Schools struggle to support LGBTQ students. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/schools-struggle-support-lgbtq-students>.
- Minor, C. (2019). *We got this: Equity, access, and the quest to be who our students need us to be*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- MrTomRad. (2019, May 06). As part of a unit on at how Racism is constructed, we are learning the history of redlining. Students are asking two questions: 1) Why are we learning this in Language Arts class? 2) Why haven't we ever learned about this before? [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/MrTomRad/status/1103323530018635781>.
- Muijs, D. & Harris, A. (2003). Teacher leadership—improvement through empowerment?: An overview of the literature. *Educational Management Administration Leadership, 31*(4), 437-448.
- Page, M. L. (2017). From Awareness to Action: Teacher Attitude and Implementation of LGBT-Inclusive Curriculum in the English Language Arts Classroom. *SAGE Open*.

- Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. (1970). *The soft revolution: A student handbook for turning school around*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Reese, D. (2018). Critical Indigenous literacies: Selecting and using children's books about Indigenous people. *Language Arts, 95*(6), 389-393.
- Reese, D. (2007). Proceed with caution: Using Native American folktales in classrooms. *Language Arts, 84*(3), 245-256.
- Rogers, R. (2014). Coaching literacy teachers as they design critical literacy practices. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 30*, 241-261.
- Sears, J. T. (1991). Helping students understand and accept sexual diversity. *Educational Leadership, 49*(1) 54-56.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Seward, M. (2019, April 02). Decolonizing the Classroom: Step 1. *Literacy & NCTE*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ncte.org/blog/2019/04/decolonizing-the-classroom/>.
- Shor, I. (1999). What is critical literacy? *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice, 1*(2), 2-32.
- Sleeter, C., & Carmona, J. (2016). *Un-standardizing curriculum: Multicultural teaching in the standards-based classroom* (2nd Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smathers Library Gallery. (2018 October 22-December 18). *Black Educators: Florida's Secret Social Justice Advocates, 1920-1960*. Gainesville, FL.
- Smith, C. (2014). The danger of silence [Video]. *TED*. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/clint\\_smith\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_silence](https://www.ted.com/talks/clint_smith_the_danger_of_silence)
- Theoharis, G. (2009). *The school leaders our children deserve: Seven keys to equity, social justice, and school reform*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Vilson, J. (2017, July 20). Why teachers need to see themselves as experts. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@thejlv/why-teachers-need-to-see-themselves-as-experts-69341b444763>
- Wenner, J.A., & Campbell, T. (2017). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 87*(1), 134-171.
- York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(3), 255-316.