PEDAGOGICAL BECOMING: ONE TEACHER’S JOURNEY TOWARD SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHING IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

A Dissertation

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

LAURA HERRING DAROLIA

Dr. Candace Kuby, Dissertation Supervisor

May 2017
The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the
dissertation entitled

PEDAGOGICAL BECOMING: ONE TEACHER’S JOURNEY TOWARD SOCIAL
JUSTICE TEACHING IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

presented by Laura Herring Darolia, a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy of
early childhood education, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of
acceptance.

________________________________________________________________________
Professor Candace Kuby

________________________________________________________________________
Professor Sarah Diem

________________________________________________________________________
Professor Carol Gilles

________________________________________________________________________
Professor Lenny Sanchez
Dedication

From start to finish, the path to my PhD has been a team effort.

To Renuka: Thank you for traveling to Columbia to watch Kavi while I went to class. And for the prescription that allowed me to breathe again so I could write again as my deadline neared.

To Ram and Pompy: Thank you for watching Kavi so I could prepare for my comprehensive exam and for always always offering your encouragement.

To Michael: Thank you for engaging in a google doc conversation about critical literacy to help me with my comprehensive exam, for your interest in my work, and for all of the general hit playing. Thanks to Beth for the constant cheering and to Julia, Kate, and Lulu for the FaceTime calls that helped me to focus on something other than graduate school.

To my parents: Thank you for instilling the value of literacy in me from my earliest days (“Books are our friends”). Your unwavering support and encouragement carried me through moments of frustration with this process. Coming to Columbia to watch the boys (multiple times), sending a care package, always asking about my work - those moves had an impact. Special thanks to my close contact for transcribing each interview. That saved me a tremendous amount of time and was an invaluable contribution. Our next trip to Peggy Jean’s is on me.

To my boys: Kavi and Bodhi: You both have been part of this journey for your entire lives. You won’t remember the days when your mom was in graduate school, but I will. Thank you for the days you took extra-long naps so I could work and, perhaps more importantly, for the days you didn’t nap and reminded me that there was so much more to
my life than crafting a dissertation. There was no better feeling than coming home from hours spent writing and seeing you both waiting for me and ready to play. You are my inspirations and you make me so happy.

To Raj D: You played the role of an academic advisor (talking through my dissertation), a tutor (would not have passed Quant without you), a sounding board (I really did not like taking Quant), and supported every move I made, while staying productive with your work, being an incredible dad to our boys, and even going to the gym once or twice in the last five years. You supported me throughout this process in every possible way; I am grateful for our partnership. Bourbon-tucky, here we come!

And finally to Gramps. Many years ago you told me, “A woman with a PhD is unstoppable.” May it be so.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must begin by thanking Olivia and her students for welcoming me into their classroom to learn alongside them. This dissertation represents a small portion of the incredible work they did each day. It was a privilege to be a part of their classroom community.

Thank you, Candace for your consistent support throughout my journey toward this degree. Full-time student, then part-time, one baby, then another… you wholly supported each decision I made and each life event I experienced over the last five years. Your thorough, thoughtful, and prompt feedback on my work maintained my momentum. I looked forward to our meetings and am incredibly grateful for your guidance throughout this process. I hope we can collaborate (or at least catch up at conferences) in the future.

To Sarah, what else can I do but look to the ceiling and say, “Very nice!” Your friendship and academic support were a significant part of my Columbia experience.

To Carol, thank you for your academic influence. I mark your “Talk in the Curriculum” class as one of the most impactful on my thinking and practice as a teacher.

To Lenny, thank you for your support. Your comments and suggestions about my work helped to push my thinking. I appreciate the time and effort you spent.

To Jessica, Selena, and Shonna: thank you for your friendship and encouragement during this journey. It was a pleasure to experience the ups and downs of graduate school with you three; I feel lucky that we landed in the same place at the same time.
# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii

List of Illustrations .............................................................................................................. ix

Chapter 1: Context for the Study ......................................................................................... 1

“Teaching is Not Neutral” ................................................................................................. 1

Critical Literacy .................................................................................................................. 2

Critical Literacy and Power ............................................................................................... 4

Living a Critically Literate Life ........................................................................................... 6

A Like-Minded Colleague .................................................................................................. 8

Critical Literacy in Early Childhood Settings ..................................................................... 9

Starting Points and Classroom Examples .......................................................................... 9

My Experience with Critical Literacy in an Early Childhood Classroom ....................... 11

An Inquiry Takes Shape ...................................................................................................... 14

Partnering with Olivia ......................................................................................................... 14

Social Justice Connections with Critical Literacy .............................................................. 15

Valuing Multiple Perspectives ........................................................................................... 15

An “Atmosphere” Guided by Children’s Literature ............................................................ 16

Student-led Social Action .................................................................................................. 19

Exploring Sociopolitical Issues ......................................................................................... 21

An Important Point about Terms ....................................................................................... 22
Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony .................................................................................. 49

Paulo Freire: Banking Versus Problem Posing Education .................................. 51

Enter Foucault ........................................................................................................ 52

Power as Flowing .................................................................................................. 54

Power as Productive, Not Solely Repressive ....................................................... 56

Analyzing the Effects of Power ........................................................................... 58

Description of the Research Process ................................................................. 60

My Role in Olivia’s Classroom ............................................................................ 60

My Emergent Process of Analysis ..................................................................... 64

Visual Mapping ..................................................................................................... 67

Analytical Questions ............................................................................................. 71

Chapter 3: The Swirl of Power: Securing Read Aloud Books to Teach for Social Justice ............................................................................................................. 74

The Swirl of Power ............................................................................................... 74

A Note about Word Choice .................................................................................. 75

Analytical Question ............................................................................................... 75

Chapter Organization ........................................................................................... 76

Olivia’s Personal Memories: “All the Literature That You Read is Mainstream White” .................................................................................................................. 77

“Saying ‘Black’ is Bad: Second Graders Think about Race ................................ 78
Exploring Current Events .................................................................................................................. 80

(Lack of) School Resources ............................................................................................................. 82

Spreading the Word .......................................................................................................................... 85

An Unexpected Ally: The Media Specialist ....................................................................................... 86

Friends in High Places: Another Unexpected Source of Read Aloud Books .................. 92

Social Justice Read Aloud Time ........................................................................................................ 99

Challenges of Social Justice Read Alouds ......................................................................................... 104

Students Engage with Social Justice Themed Books ................................................................. 106

*Lady in a Box* (McGovern, 1999): “The Conversation Just Kind of Took Hold of Itself” ................................................................................................................................. 106

*Jalapeno Bagels* (Wing, 1996): “He Was Super Into the Book” ........................................... 108

*Happy to be Nappy* (hooks, 1999): “I’m Proud of My Mom” ................................................. 110

Power Flows During Social Justice Read Alouds ............................................................................. 110

Sam: “He’s on Fire for Justice” ........................................................................................................ 111

Andre and Willow: “They Asked Questions Every Single Day” .............................................. 112

Maya: “…It Helps Kids Identify Who They Are” ........................................................................... 115

A Controversial Assignment ............................................................................................................. 119

“They Get Happy When We Talk About Their Differences” ............................................... 121

“I’m Not Touching That Beast” .................................................................................................... 128

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 137
Chapter 5: Insights Gained ........................................................................................................... 139

A Portrayal of Critical Literacy in Action ...................................................................................... 140

Olivia’s Challenges ......................................................................................................................... 140

The Unexpected Consequences of Reaching Out ......................................................................... 141

Potential for Wider Collaboration .................................................................................................. 142

Pedagogical Issues ......................................................................................................................... 144

Absorbing Backlash ....................................................................................................................... 146

What Can We Learn from Olivia’s Experiences? ......................................................................... 148

Implications for Teacher Education Programs .............................................................................. 150

Motivation is Key ............................................................................................................................ 151

Teaching is Not Neutral ................................................................................................................ 152

Young Children are Ready and Able ............................................................................................ 154

In-Service Opportunities ............................................................................................................... 155

Professional Development ............................................................................................................. 155

Being Willing to Engage ................................................................................................................ 156

Network with Like-Minded Educators ........................................................................................... 157

Tell the Stories ................................................................................................................................. 158

Theoretical Implications ................................................................................................................ 159

Looking for New Connections ....................................................................................................... 161

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 162
References ................................................................................................................. 164

VITA ........................................................................................................................... 174
List of Illustrations

Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The cover of <em>Separate is Never Equal</em> (Tonatiuh, 2014)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Section of the class audit trail with critical questions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Social justice books” on display on top of classroom cabinets</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“Social justice books” on display on the whiteboard ledge</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Social justice books” on display on the windowsill</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Social justice books” on display on the windowsill</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Analytic memo about Foucault and critical sociocultural theory</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Analytic memo: Literacy and power with data excerpts around power</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Analytic memo: Foucault and data</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>A segment of the visual map</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>A segment of the visual map</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The entire visual map</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Identity Bag Project assignment</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2016 Demographics for Beech Elementary</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Data Production</td>
<td>62-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Requested Books and Beth’s Responses</td>
<td>89-91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Social Justice Read Aloud Texts and Discussion Questions</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PEDAGOGICAL BECOMING: ONE TEACHER’S JOURNEY TOWARD SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHING IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

Laura Herring Darolia

Dr. Candace Kuby, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

This dissertation followed the journey of a second grade teacher as she strove to create what she called a “social justice atmosphere” in her classroom. The teacher’s pedagogical approach is situated within the literature on critical literacy, as she worked to interrupt the status quo, value multiple perspectives, and promote social action through the class read alouds on sociopolitical issues. In order to thoroughly depict her teaching processes, decisions, and roadblocks, a Foucauldian lens is used to track the micro-practices of power swirling around her. Insights include a glimpse into the challenges of teaching using a critical literacy framework in early childhood settings, implications for teacher education programs and in-service professional development, and the affordances of using a post-structural lens in studies of critical literacy.
Chapter 1: Context for the Study

“Teaching is Not Neutral”

I taught second grade for six years before I heard the phrase, “Teaching is not neutral.” Sitting in a graduate literacy methods class taught by Vivian Vasquez, these words transformed by worldview. As an undergraduate elementary education major, I did well. I had always done well in school and fit the mold of a high-performing white woman poised to teach young children. My first four years of teaching were in a Title One school in San Jose, California. The Title One distinction meant that because more than 40% of students enrolled were eligible for free or reduced lunch, the school received federal funding in an attempt to provide more educational opportunities for low-income students. Each year, students in my class of twenty were from a collection of countries including Vietnam, Cambodia, India, the Philippines, Japan, Mexico, El Salvador, and China, along with some born in the United States. Multiple languages were spoken and many families lived in poverty.

I loved my students fiercely as I taught them all the same story out of a basal reader, gave the same worksheets to color in, and read books aloud that I chose with little regard to the bountiful cultural diversity in the room. I played the role of a teacher very well with weekly spelling tests, homework each night, and holiday themed art projects. Looking back on those days now, I cringe at this surface-level instruction. Though I did not follow an official script, I rarely deviated from curricular teacher guides.

When I truly began to think about the idea that teaching is biased and learned about classrooms implementing a framework called “critical literacy,” something came alive within me. At the time, having relocated from California, I was teaching second
grade at an independent school in Washington, D.C. Here, the annual tuition for kindergarten started around $25,000 and climbed each year through eighth grade. This steep price tag automatically excluded a significant portion of the population; as a result, the student body was predominantly white and affluent, though financial aid was available to those who qualified. There were typically three to five non-white students in a class of 25 – 28. In this setting, I had access to endless resources and a substantial amount of curricular freedom. Our students did not take standardized tests, which felt like a tangible weight lifted off my shoulders. Curricular autonomy combined with my enthusiasm for the content of my graduate school classes provided the ideal circumstances to transform my learning into action. Over time, I began to adopt critical literacy as my pedagogical framework.

**Critical Literacy**

Ira Shor (1999) describes critical literacy as follows,

> We are what we say and do. The way we speak and are spoken to help shape us into the people we become. Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us. That world addresses us to produce the different identities we carry forward in life: men are addressed differently than are women, people of color differently than whites, elite students differently than those from working families. Yet, though language is fateful in teaching us what kind of people to become and what kind of society to make, discourse is not destiny. We can redefine ourselves and remake society, if we choose, through alternative rhetoric and dissident projects. This is where critical literacy begins, for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished,
just, or humane. (p 1).

Shor considers critical literacy to be an avenue for both personal and social redesign. An important component of the framework is to notice how language positions people, and thus influences identity and status. However, what is created can be redesigned. This is the work of critical literacy – questioning the way things are and working toward social change in the name of equity, or as Shor (1999) succinctly offers, “words rethinking worlds” (p. 1).

I conceptualize equity to be aligned with notions of fairness, as opposed to being synonymous with mathematical equality. Equity has multiple dimensions including socioeconomic status, gender, geography, ethnicity, and sexual identity (Menefee & Bray, 2015). People are positioned differently within society based on life circumstances (i.e., identifying as a member of a marginalized group). Social positioning connects to access to resources and opportunities (i.e., high quality education). A critical literacy framework questions why things are the way they are, explores oppression, privilege, and bias, and works toward more equitable redesign.

There are several conceptualizations of this stance toward teaching. Vivian Vasquez (2004) says critical literacy is lived and as such, cannot be taught traditionally, following predictable lesson plans designed to meet specific objectives. According to Vasquez, critical literacy is not a discipline; there are not carved out spaces for “critical literacy time” throughout the day. Instead, it provides an entry point for all the work that happens among students and teachers as a community of learners. Bringing a critical perspective to teaching means that pedagogical decisions are made based in large part on the resources, passions, and cognitive dissonance of the students in an effort to expose
inequities; to examine the relationship between language and power; to understand that
texts of all kinds position readers; and to work toward social justice (Janks, 2010,
Vasquez, 2004).

Comber (2001) offers a set of core dynamic principles of critical literacy
including: engaging with local realities, researching language and its relationship with
power, valuing students’ ways of knowing and experiences as assets, redesigning texts,
challenging taken-for-granted “school” texts, focusing on students’ use of local cultural
texts, and examining who has power and how it is used. Larson and Marsh (2005) add
the following key tenets: literacy is not neutral; ‘race,’ class, culture, gender, language,
sexual orientation, and physical abilities determine who has access to dominant literacy
discourses; critical literacy can lead to social action and awareness; and taking this stance
involves having a critical perspective on language and literacy itself, on particular texts,
and on wider social practices. Lewison, Flint, and van Sluys (2002) reviewed 30 years-
worth of critical literacy literature and condensed its characterization into the following
interrelated domains: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple
viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting
social justice. The term sociopolitical refers to the idea that social practices are not
neutral, but instead perpetuate unequal power relations. Engaging a critical literacy
framework inherently leads to an examination of power.

Critical Literacy and Power

For Janks (2010), the word “critical” signals a focus on power and leads to the
work of uncovering what and whose interests are privileged or silenced when engaging in
literacy practices. Christensen (1999) writes that critical literacy is “about reading and
uncovering power relations in the world” (p. 213). O’Brien (2001) agrees that neither teaching nor texts are neutral. When reading books with her students she takes the opportunity to bring the presence of power to the surface and asks questions such as, “who has power; what doesn’t the writer tell you; what does the writer tell me that I already know; what do I know that the writer doesn’t tell me” (Comber & Nixon, 1999, p. 339). This line of questioning encourages students to consider that the author has a purpose in her writing and as readers, they have the agency to challenge, extend, trouble and transform what is offered. Students engaging in critical literacy work will ask, “Can I change it; can I take a different position on these things; can I look at the world differently?” (Comber & Nixon, 1999, p. 340). Critical literacy is about investigating the power of language and texts and how they shape social realities and personal identities. It is about questioning and reimagining what is considered “the norm;” it is about valuing multiple perspectives and not only acknowledging imbalances of power, but working to redesign them in more equitable ways.

In considering what critical literacy is, it is also important to name what it is not. Critical literacy is not being negative or cynical, not political correctness, or about censoring the bad books and only reading the good, not indoctrination or developmental, not about identifying racism, sexism, prejudice, and homophobia somewhere else or in texts that have little relevance to readers, not whole language with a social justice edge (Comber, 2001, p 272).

While it may be a concern that critical teaching and its deconstruction of power relations will create apathetic or angst-ridden children searching for sources of complaint; this is not the purpose. The goal is to nurture minds that question, argue, wonder and act around
life events that are meaningful to them. Kuby (2013) conceptualizes critical literacy as embodied social action and details how her students worked to advance equity through their artwork, role playing, and relationships. The local context becomes the curriculum, making the work personal and potentially transformative for both students and teachers.

**Living a Critically Literate Life**

While critical literacy encourages critique of textual messages, it also invites consideration of our own perspectives and how and why we understand the world the way we do (Jones, 2004; Vasquez, 2010). One of the key elements of the implementation of critical literacy is the positioning of the classroom teacher. Facilitating critical conversations and creating space for students to follow their inquiries and challenge power structures requires a teacher to reflect on her own life experiences and biases. Vasquez (2004) argues that in order to guide students in this work, it is imperative that teachers live with a critical perspective. This entails actively examining the relationship between language and power and revising personal assumptions about the world in order to understand the positions from which we act and speak (Vasquez, Harste, & Tate, 2013).

We all read from specific positions and it’s essential to consider how and why we read, speak, and act in the ways we do in order to further understand our own biases (Jones, 2004; Vasquez, 2010). Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013) write,

> From a critical literacy perspective, examining one’s own assumptions, values, and beliefs is part and parcel of understanding the position(s) from which we speak, the position(s) from which we teach and the Discourses (ways of being, doing, acting, talking, and thinking) that shape those positionings” (p. 23).
It is this analysis, this self-reflection that enables practitioners to not just simply say, “Teaching is not neutral,” but to teach in a way that acknowledges their biases and privilege, creates space to explore their students’ questions about (in)equity and values students’ multiple perspectives. Teachers must notice and admit that inequity exists and also examine their own stances toward social issues before/during/after engaging with children. This work is not easy; while it is exciting and important, it is equally exhausting and intimidating.

For me, this process is on-going. For example, I consistently reflect on my own histories in relation to sociopolitical issues, such as race. I attended private elementary and high schools that were filled with students and teachers who looked like me. My friends came from similar backgrounds and I was rarely confronted with racial difference in my social life. That being said, I lived in a predominantly black neighborhood. Most of my neighbors were black, but I didn’t know them well. My family never talked about race and reflecting on this has caused me to consider the implicit bias I may hold. While not intentionally prejudiced, my life experiences influenced what I grew up understanding to be “normal.” This process of questioning my own assumptions about the world is a step in living a critically literate life that influences my thinking and teaching.

Consistent self-reflection made me more intentional about considering multiple perspectives, especially in relation to my students. When I taught in California, my class each year was comprised of students with rich cultural traditions and life experiences, but I did not focus on those. Instead, I called upon my own memories as an elementary school student and attempted to replicate what worked well for me. Read alouds of my
favorite books, coloring pages, weekly spelling tests – these classroom activities made up my own idealized second grade classroom, and simultaneously ignored the experiences and strengths of my students. Once I started learning about critical literacy, I gained an understanding of the value of students’ out-of-school lives and shifted my pedagogical approach to utilize students’ experiences as vital aspects of our curriculum.

For example, I created a unit called “Exploring Identity Through Photography.” Each student used a disposable camera to document images including self-portraits and representations of their cultures and families. Lessons centered on composing images with attention to the intended message. I asked my students to consider what they wanted people to know about them, their cultural traditions, and their families and then to communicate that with an image. Once the photographs were developed, students wrote poems about them. Each student chose one photograph and poem combination to display at a school-wide assembly. This unit was personal and enjoyable to the students; it brought their out-of-school lives into the classroom as worthy components of curriculum.

A Like-Minded Colleague

After five years of teaching in Washington, D.C., I relocated to a college town in the Midwest and spent one year teaching second grade in a Title One school. As someone who was developing the practice of using a critical literacy framework in an early childhood classroom, it was a pleasure to meet Olivia, one of my new second grade teammates. We were only colleagues for one year, but our like-minded approach to teaching created a lasting bond. Without formal coursework on critical literacy, Olivia embodied the crux of the framework in her teaching. She created the space for her students to question the way things were and to consider more equitable alternatives. Her
pedagogical vision was to have a “social justice classroom” (personal conversation, August, 2015), the process of which is discussed at length throughout this dissertation. Through our work together, it became clear that Olivia’s social justice goals were in line with the tenets of critical literacy. She agreed to welcome me into her classroom for my dissertation research; our partnership was born out of our mutual desire to explore sociopolitical issues with young children, while simultaneously living critically literate lives. As we imagined possibilities for what a critical literacy framework might create in her classroom, we turned to the literature for guidance.

**Critical Literacy in Early Childhood Settings**

There is a collection of both academic and teacher research that describes critical literacy practices in early childhood settings. To visualize this work in progress, I offer a selection of studies below.

**Starting Points and Classroom Examples**

A common activity for engaging in critical literacy with young children is to choose socially aware picture books to read aloud (Chafel, Flint, Hammel, & Pomeroy, 2007; Comber & Nixon, 1999; Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012; Macphee, 1997). Welcoming sociopolitical issues (i.e., poverty and race) into the classroom through literature may provide an entry point to critical conversations; conversations that identify bias and inequity and consider more equitable alternatives. Reading stories with (in)equity-oriented plots (i.e., segregation) with my students was the method I used when I first implemented critical literacy practices as a teacher. This pedagogical move also served as the foundation to Olivia’s approach to teaching for social justice (to be discussed in detail throughout this dissertation).
As mentioned, taking a class with Vivian Vasquez introduced me to the framework of critical literacy. Her work serves as the most influential to me, as it demonstrates pedagogical possibilities I never imagined. In a thorough and sophisticated display of living a critical literacy curriculum, Vasquez (2004) describes how her junior kindergartners negotiated topics of inquiry and implemented social justice oriented action (i.e., advocating for a menu change at the school barbecue so their vegetarian classmate and his family could eat), while consistently documenting their learning along the classroom walls. Another example that reorganized my conceptualization of teaching is from Souto-Manning (2009). She writes about creating the space for her first graders to use multicultural literature as the impetus for an investigation and eventual action regarding what they considered to be in-school segregation.

Incorporating technology into critical literacy practices is a way to expand students’ access to information about issues that matter to them. Crafton, Brennan, and Silvers (2007) implement ways to use technology when a first grade class wants to further investigate the news story of a local homeless woman. Through engagement with multiliteracies, these children transform from first grade students to critically engaged democratic citizens. In another study, students develop an interest in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and because their teacher operates from a critical perspective, they use technology to pursue their questions. Through this project, they collaborate, experience empathy for people outside of their local context, and feel the desire to help those in need (Silvers, Shorey, & Crafton, 2010). Silvers et al., (2010) surmise, “We learned that teaching for social justice and critical literacy can become an integral part of most
curricula, even in the earliest grades, and that mandated instructional agendas do not always mesh with the needs or interests of the children” (p. 404).

This brief review of critical literacy work in early childhood settings demonstrates how the practices of valuing outside-of-school literacies, examining the relationship between language and power, and redesigning multimodal texts in more equitable ways can be enacted with young learners. After reading about the experiences of other classrooms, like those described above, I began to create space for these kinds of learning engagements with my own students, which I discuss below. Over time, my interest in critical literacy in early childhood settings influenced my desire to pursue this research project with Olivia.

**My Experience with Critical Literacy in an Early Childhood Classroom**

As I read about critical literacy in early childhood settings, I was captivated by the tales of student-driven social action. I imagined what my students might create as we challenged the status quo, looked for and listened to marginalized voices, and redesigned texts to be more equitable. I excitedly planned lessons in synch with these goals.

For example, when I taught in Washington, D.C., the “big idea” of our second grade social studies curriculum was that environment influences culture. We focused on three populations to explore this idea, one of which was the Eastern Woodland Native Americans. Knowing my students’ familiarity with Disney movies, I designed this unit of study using Pocahontas, an Eastern Woodland Native American, as our entry point. I wanted to challenge the students’ consumption of information as related to native groups. We read excerpts from *Pocahontas* (2003), a chapter book aimed toward adolescents written by Native American author, Joseph Bruchac, who cited primary sources, a

While absorbing these three versions of Pocahontas’s story, my students took notes on environmental and cultural noticings, in order to address our stated curricular goal. However, we also compared each story and noted differences in the portrayal of the people and events of this historical period. We questioned which version was the most accurate and wondered why anyone would want to tell Pocahontas’s story. What was the authors’ purpose? Does a Native American author committed to writing with accuracy and respect for native peoples have the same motivation to share her story as a wealthy corporation? Why did Disney get involved? These questions were discussed through the lens of equity.

This was an attempt to acknowledge that bias pervades texts of all kinds. I wanted my second graders to start to internalize the practice of considering the source, to know that just because something is written in a book or portrayed in a movie, does not make the depiction accurate or fair. The lesson was not to boycott Disney or to read only non-fiction that cites primary sources, rather my hope was that learning experiences like these initiated the critical consumption of knowledge that may lead to social redesign. Teaching young children to consider multiple perspectives in order to decide their own stances on an issue is an important lesson. My second grade students critically reviewed three versions of the same story and considered the authors’ purposes. Some felt strongly that Disney’s portrayal was unfair to the legacy of Pocahontas and was primarily used to make money. Perhaps in the future, when these students determine something is unfair or inaccurate, they will act, or at least think in a way that challenges the status quo.
As my approach to teaching shifted toward incorporating critical literacy practices, I became familiar with children’s books that represented all kinds of families and backgrounds, and my read aloud selections were more purposeful. During these read alouds, the questions I asked changed from the typical, “What was the problem in the story? How did the characters feel at the end?” to the more critical, “Why was it like this? How could we change it? Whose voice is heard and whose voice is missing?” Again, this stimulated a different kind of thinking and ideally helped to hone student lenses toward equity. I became a curricular resource within my school, sharing my critical literacy experiences with other teachers to broaden its presence in our classrooms and with families to begin to educate them on what this kind of teaching looks like. Using critical literacy as my pedagogical framework made my teaching emergent and challenging, but also energizing and engaging.

If I would have stayed in Washington, D.C., I have no doubt I would still be teaching at the same school, working with students, staff, and families to engage in critical literacy practices. However, a geographic move for my husband’s job in 2012 provided me the opportunity to enroll in this doctoral program and to pursue my studies of early childhood literacy. After completing a year of full-time graduate school, I missed the energy of elementary school students and the engagement of putting what I learned to work. I chose to become a part-time doctoral student and a full-time elementary school teacher. Once again, I entered a second grade classroom, and there, I met Olivia.
An Inquiry Takes Shape

Partnering with Olivia

Olivia and I were on the same second grade team at Elm Elementary (all teacher, principal, student, and school names are pseudonyms). Our year together was my tenth as an elementary school teacher and her first. We became fast friends and soon started sharing our teaching ideas that were outside the teacher guides the district supplied. Olivia had not studied critical literacy, however, her innate stance toward teaching was well aligned with critical literacy practices. For example, she created units on slavery and the Harlem Renaissance, outside of the standard curriculum, in order to explore identity and oppression with her students. Unfortunately, implementing these kinds of lessons was a challenge.

We were expected to teach the same lessons at the same times as the other three second grade teachers, but Olivia and I believed in teaching about equity and created opportunities to do so. This proved much harder in a school preoccupied with test scores and linear curriculum, than it was at my school in Washington, D.C. Assessments and curricular programs occupied much of our days, making deviation a challenge. We settled for small moments like read alouds about social issues (i.e., fathers in jail, segregation), exploring slavery, the Harlem Renaissance, and civil rights, and discussions about current events (i.e., the death of Nelson Mandela and his legacy). While this approach contradicted the idea of critical literacy being a lived curriculum (Vasquez, 2004) as opposed to an isolated part of the day, this was the arrangement that worked best for us. It was possible to implement read alouds and discussions about current events throughout our days and still stay on track with assessments and curricular expectations.
As someone who had studied critical literacy and had taught at a school with curricular autonomy, “fitting” critical literacy into our day was a significant tension I felt. (For a more in-depth discussion on this tension, see Darolia, 2015.)

I left this school after one year. While it was not my intent to do so, teaching second grade while pursuing a doctoral degree was more than a full-time job; I chose to focus on the degree. Olivia and I had forged a strong friendship and I knew we would remain in touch. Olivia taught for one more year at Elm Elementary, then moved to Beech Elementary, a new school in the district. During her third year as a teacher, she agreed to work with me for my dissertation research. Still interested in teaching about equity in early childhood settings, we collaborated to design a project that would support what she called having a “social justice classroom.”

**Social Justice Connections with Critical Literacy**

Over the course of this inquiry, I asked Olivia several times what she meant by the phrase “social justice classroom.” What follows is a selection of her descriptions of the work involved in bringing her vision to life. I make the case that her conceptualizations of social justice teaching relates to how critical literacy is discussed in the literature.

**Valuing Multiple Perspectives**

Olivia explained,

I just want kids (my students) to be able, I don’t know, to speak for themselves, advocate for themselves and be aware that they can have an opinion and I won’t even say be able to accept others’ opinions because I don’t accept everyone’s opinion. Or even embrace (others’ opinions). I struggle with the word “embrace”
when you are talking about social justice themes. I don’t know if there is a better word. I don’t embrace. Everything is not embraceable…But I am open to dialogue and understanding your point of view… That’s where essentially I want my kids to develop that critical piece (interview, January 28, p. 7).

Here, Olivia demonstrated how she lived with a critical perspective in her own life, a key part of being a critical literacy practitioner (Vasquez, 2004). Olivia was willing to engage in discussions with those whose stances may differ from hers in an effort to understand new perspectives. While she made no promises that she would “embrace” alternate viewpoints, she was open to respectfully engaging in critical conversations, learning from others while advocating her own position. She wanted to teach her students to do the same. This aligns with the critical literacy tenet of valuing multiple perspectives (Lewison, Flint, & van Sluys, 2002).

**An “Atmosphere” Guided by Children’s Literature**

Two months later, once again I asked Olivia to talk about what it meant to her to have a “social justice classroom.” She responded,

What I’ve been thinking in my brain is that social justice, what I would ideally like to see is a cultural, just an atmosphere, not necessarily something that I’m teaching…in the next coming years to be just how we (my students and me) communicate with each other, just how we approach situations, just open conversations where we can talk about (sociopolitical) topics, different topics, and kind of integrate those into the curriculum just naturally. I don’t know how to do that yet, so I’m still in the process of reading and researching and seeing how that’s done, but I think the best way to approach that now is through children’s
literature so that kids can become familiar with those topics that they see and hear about on the news, that so deeply affect us (interview, March 31, p. 1).

This response connects with critical literacy in two key areas. First, Olivia admitted she was striving for a social justice “atmosphere,” where conversations about social issues happen in the classroom organically. Vivian Vasquez (2004) describes critical literacy as “lived,” meaning learning experiences arise authentically based on student interests and current events within the local and global communities. Olivia’s “atmosphere” had potential to create a lived curriculum.

The second connection to critical literacy is Olivia’s use of texts as entry points to her social justice pedagogy. At this point in her teaching career, Olivia planned lessons about sociopolitical issues through the books she chose to read aloud to her students. After she and I talked together about questioning techniques aligned with critical literacy, Olivia focused her questions on power and the status quo. During read alouds, she asked questions such as, “Who has power; why is it like this?” to guide her students to consider not only the author’s purpose, but also the social conditions in which the story was set.

For example, during my dissertation research I observed Olivia read *Separate is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014), a book about segregated schools. She instructed her students to analyze the cover of the book (see Figure 1) and the following conversation took place:
Figure 1: The cover of *Separate is Never Equal*

**Olivia:** What do you notice (about the cover of *Separate is Never Equal*)?

**Naiya:** They’re walking away from each other.

**Diego:** I see a white school and a black school.

**Dante:** The white school is even nicer than the black school. They made it good looking and taller than the black school.

**Olivia:** Why is it like this?

**Brian:** They’re not allowed to go to school together.

**Willow:** It looks like they’re mad at each other.

Asking “why” questions like this encouraged Olivia’s students to think beyond the text, to consider the social context of the setting and to wonder how it could be different, all practices used in a critical literacy framework. Olivia and I selected pertinent questions to display on the class audit trail (an audit trail is a visual map of learning to be discussed in Chapter 3), with the hope that they would become habits of
mind for the students. Figure 2 shows a section of the audit trail.

Figure 2: Section of the class audit trail with critical questions

**Student-led Social Action**

Olivia also wanted there to be some sort of social action involved in her social justice teaching. She explained,

I would like to every year have some kind of culminating activity or something that’s done from the beginning of the year through to the end of the year that just touches on certain issues that are currently prevalent in society, whether that’s gender issues, whether it’s race, whether it’s class or poverty, issues of that nature. I would like it to be student led. So that’s kind of where I’m at with it now. I know this year with our poverty unit they kind of talked about wanting to do something to continue to help with feeding kids. I would ask them (her
students) questions to see where their mind goes. So I said, ‘We can collect canned goods, and we can collect coats and things of that nature. But what happens after they use the canned goods?’ I would leave open-ended questions. They would think and… someone said, ‘We could plant a garden.’ So I asked Susan (principal) if we could plant a garden and she told me no (interview, March 31, pp. 1-2).

Olivia wanted the social action to be student-led, similar to the ways it often unfolds in the literature on critical literacy (see for example, Cowhey, 2006; Vasquez, 2004). This is the ideal scenario for a social justice teacher—students become impassioned about an injustice within their community, learn more, organize, and advocate for change.

Creating the circumstances that lead to this path is challenging. Olivia recounted that her students expressed interest in wanting to help children who were hungry. As she pushed their thinking with open-ended questions, the suggestion of a planting a garden was turned down by Susan, the building principal. Olivia did not offer more information about Susan’s response when she recounted this story and I did not ask for more details. My understanding was that, while Olivia had an amiable relationship with her principal and mentioned to me that she enjoyed working with her, once Susan made a decision, Olivia did not question it. I do not know if deference to Susan was the general stance of teachers and staff members or if this was Olivia’s specific approach to encounters with her principal; we never discussed the climate of the school in relation to Susan.

Olivia’s efforts to go beyond a one-time collection of food demonstrated her desire to inspire justice-oriented students. Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013) explain,
When critical literacy is addressed in schools, we often stop at the level of the food drive or organizing a community campaign to collect money or fill a food pantry. While these are noble efforts, Westheimer and Kahne remind us that as educators, we should not be satisfied to produce personally responsible or even participatory citizens. Instead, we should aim for nothing less than sending forth justice-oriented citizens. The difference here is that justice-oriented citizens engage in sustained work to contribute to change that could have transformative effects for the communities in which they live and the people who live there (p. 8).

Olivia’s desire for her students to engage in social action in the name of equity aligns with a key point of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & van Sluys, 2002).

Exploring Sociopolitical Issues

Olivia’s quest for a social justice atmosphere was influenced by current events related to equity. She wanted her classroom to be a place where students asked questions and learned more about news headlines. When I asked her what motivated her to pursue a social justice teaching agenda, she explained,

Just the issues that are prevalent right now. I mean. Let’s see. This is my third year (of teaching), and I think my first year was right in the midst of Ferguson (Missouri) and Trayvon Martin (incidents of unarmed black men killed by police) and all those different things, so it’s something happening every day that encourages me to move forward with this work even with the pushback that I might receive. It’s just important work that needs to be done, and even if I’m unable to help guide students towards more equitable thinking… I would at least
get them thinking about it to the point where they recognize it (injustice), they notice that this is a problem, this is an issue even if they don’t know how to express it verbally, they know something’s going on and they can watch the news with their parents or they can hear these stories, they can pinpoint this is an injustice - this is not OK. I think that’s mainly what encourages me to keep going with this work (interview, March 31, pp. 3-4).

Olivia’s focus on sociopolitical issues like race aligns with another tenet of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & van Sluys, 2002). She understood that privilege is distributed unevenly throughout society and she wanted to create space for her students to explore, question, and critique the way things were.

**An Important Point about Terms**

As you will see, my research questions specifically use the term “social justice” instead of “critical literacy” because that is how Olivia described her approach toward teaching. That being said, as detailed above, her pedagogical moves were in line with critical literacy practices. I situate my research within a critical literacy framework, but acknowledge that Olivia used the phrase “social justice.”

Part of my research was to understand Olivia’s conceptualization of social justice teaching (her personal connections; how it was implemented in her classroom; why it was important). I use the language she used so I do not misrepresent her stance. As a result, from this point forward, the terms “social justice” and “critical literacy” are used interchangeably.
Rationale for the Inquiry

Processes, Decisions, and Roadblocks

Since starting graduate school in 2009, I have read, discussed, practiced, written and presented upon implementing a critical literacy framework in early childhood settings. There is a substantial collection of literature around critical literacy including how the tenets of critical literacy come alive with young children (see for example: Cowhey, 2006), specific models of implementation (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015), possibilities for blending technology and critical literacy (Vasquez & Felderman, 2013), and how to include critical literacy practices in pre-service coursework (Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). In addition, Comber and Simpson (2001) edited a book called *Negotiating Critical Literacies in Classrooms* and Vasquez (2004) describes her experience negotiating critical literacy in an early childhood setting.

However, something is absent from this body of scholarship, made visible by common questions asked when engaged in critical literacy practices: “Whose story is missing? Whose voice is silent?” While teachers’ voices are present in the telling and reflecting upon what happened in their classrooms, the daily processes, decisions, and roadblocks of teaching critically remain largely unheard. By “roadblocks,” I mean instances that paused Olivia’s momentum; times when she felt like something was interfering with, challenging, or interrupting her social justice agenda. For Olivia, this was in the form of a lack of adequate pedagogical resources, indecision around lesson planning, and family opposition. What kinds of tensions abound when a teacher consciously chooses to welcome sociopolitical issues into an early childhood classroom? What actually unfolds in the classroom? What happens when families or administrators
argue that this kind of teaching should not be pursued with young children? How do teachers negotiate the many factors (i.e., securing resources, planning an emergent curriculum) around teaching young children using a critical literacy framework?

From my own teaching experience and in observing Olivia’s, it is clear that teaching using a critical literacy framework requires daily reflection and unwavering commitment. This dissertation describes the indecision, the frustration, and the sources of motivation that contributed to one teacher’s experience. In doing so, the community of early childhood educators may gain a new understanding of the complex personal and professional work that goes into teaching critically. Therefore, I pursue my research to extend the body of scholarship on critical literacy by specifically detailing an in-service early childhood teacher’s experience.

**Applying a Post-structural Lens to Critical Literacy Research**

Another scholarly contribution this study offers is theoretical. Influenced by critical social theory, ontologically critical literacy is based on the idea that society favors some while marginalizing others. This view emphasizes the impact of historical structures on race, gender, and class (Hatch, 2002). The word “critical” inherently denotes an examination of power. Broadly, critical social theory reveals how domination works at both structural and individual levels and argues that inequities in power are oppressive (Levinson, 2011).

While the focus of some critical literacy scholarship is on the pedagogy influenced by critical social theory (i.e., Freire, 2000), my focus is on the pedagogy *coming to be*… the relationships and power structures Olivia navigated as she taught for social justice. Critical social theory is a term that encapsulates several theories including
feminism, post-structuralism, and hegemony. Each specific theory has its own conceptualization of power. When I began my dissertation research, my thinking about critical social theory was guided by the work of Marx (1868), Gramsci (1971), and Freire (2000) who generally characterize power in terms of the oppressor and the oppressed.

In the midst of the study, I chose to adopt a post-structural theoretical orientation in order to track how Olivia navigated micro-practices of power while making pedagogical decisions, instead of focusing on how those with power oppressed her social justice agenda. My focus was on Olivia’s pedagogical process, not on the pedagogy itself. I called upon Foucault’s (1977; 1978; 1980) conceptualization of power that includes the following ideas: power is productive, power flows through sets of relations, and power has multiple effects, in order to track the micro-practices of power that swirled from, around, and through Olivia. This Foucauldian lens transitioned my understanding of power from an oppressor/oppressed binary to seeing Olivia as a vehicle of power herself. I applied a post-structural lens to this inquiry in order to step away from the oppressor/oppressed binary of critical social theory and to move toward fresh insights about teaching critically in early childhood classrooms. (See Chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion on critical and post-structural conceptualizations of power and how theory influenced my data analysis).

The following research questions were conceived based on my interests in critical literacy in early childhood settings. Olivia approved them and we agreed to plan, problem-solve, and debrief together during my time in her classroom.
1. How does a teacher negotiate teaching for social justice within an early childhood classroom? Specifically, how do the following aspects influence a teacher’s approach to teaching for social justice:

- Personal experiences
- Members of the school community
  - Superintendent
  - Building principal and assistant principal
  - Media specialist
  - Families
  - Students

2. In the midst of this negotiation, what becomes of her pedagogy?

   It is important to note that my original research question did not list members of the school community this specifically. Rather, they were generally included in one bullet point as, “Members of the school community (colleagues, administration, families).” Once engaged in the research, however, the exercises of power of certain people impacted Olivia’s social justice agenda in noteworthy ways. As a result, I revised my first research question to specifically name those people (i.e., the superintendent and the media specialist).

   Before entering into the description, analysis, and interpretation of the data produced, it is important to clarify what I mean by the words “negotiate” and “negotiation” as stated in my research questions. Teaching is a complicated job. While students’ best interests are the ideal motivation for teachers’ work, each individual teacher has in mind what that means to her. Similarly, each individual school has its own
agenda, which may include using scripted programs to boost test scores, creating innovative curricula to stimulate critical thinking, or anything in between. Furthermore, students and families have expectations for what school should be, perhaps a place that teaches obedience and emphasizes college-readiness or maybe a more flexible environment that promotes collaboration and inquiry. Teachers must work hard to meet the needs of all parties; this requires staying true to their own teaching philosophies, teaching in a way that is supported by administrators, engaging all students, and pleasing families. I used the term, “negotiate” to mean moving around and through something(s). Teachers move around and through factors such as mandated curricula, administrative pressure, and student needs in order to be successful.

Teaching for social justice adds another layer to this negotiation. Sociopolitical topics (i.e., race and poverty) are often deemed inappropriate for young children to know about, let alone to learn about; the dominant discourse around early childhood education portrays young children as innocent beings not ready for critical thinking (MacNaughton, 2000). I studied how Olivia moved around and through the various factors (i.e., personal memories, parent opposition) that encouraged or discouraged her work as she advanced her social justice agenda. This is what I meant when I asked in research question number one how she negotiates “teaching for social justice.” Research question number two was the natural follow-up; as Olivia navigated her way through and around the people and things (i.e. read aloud books) that influenced her work, what did her teaching look like?

Research question number two asked what “becomes” of Olivia’s pedagogy. Let me explain that word choice, as well. Poststructuralists argue that the self is always in conflict, always amending its understanding of its role within the world, always shifting
in relationships with others (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). This implies a lack of stability, an ever-changing sense of self and could also be conceptualized as a negotiation - the self as always in flux, moving through and around social realities and relationships. Olivia, then, was never stable, but was constantly shifting in response to particular contexts (i.e., teaching for social justice) and circumstances (i.e., muted administrator support). This negotiation of self relates to the question of what becomes of Olivia’s pedagogy. Olivia was in a state of becoming, as opposed to a finalized state of being; her pedagogical moves were also in process. She was constantly creating, implementing, and reflecting upon her social justice instruction. She was always in the midst of becoming a social justice educator.

The Research Space

Data Production

Given my personal and professional history with Olivia, I thought she would be open to collaborating on a social justice oriented project. We agreed to work together to plan social justice lessons in her second grade classroom during the 2015-2016 academic year. We brainstormed our approach starting in August of 2015 and met informally several times before official data production began. I use the term “production” in relation to data because the focus of this project was to see what effects of power produced within and around Olivia in the context of her social justice teaching. While I certainly did “collect” information in the form of audio and video recordings, field notes and interviews that I took home to study, my analytical process was centered on reading the data along with Foucault (1977; 1978; 1980) in an attempt to understand what was produced within and around Olivia. The verb “collect” implies something is out there
waiting to be taken. However, as a researcher, I was active in the process of in-the-moment producing in the classroom.

The Application

My plan to conduct my dissertation research in a local public elementary school classroom was met with the sobering reality that there would be several gatekeepers weighing in on my work. Not only did I have to successfully defend my research questions and design in front of my doctoral committee and submit an application to the university’s Institutional Review Board, but I also had to seek permission from the school district to engage in research in one of their classrooms. As I prepared the necessary documents, a fellow doctoral student told me how her social justice oriented study had been denied by the district more than once because the principal in whose school she hoped to work did not support the focus of her research.

Olivia and I talked about how to frame our work, knowing that “social justice” means different things to different people and could be a controversial topic, especially in an early childhood classroom. We decided that it would be imperative to explicitly align my research objectives with district-wide goals in order to mount a strong case for our project. The district was focused on issues of poverty and equity within their student body during the year I applied to conduct research. We synced our social justice goals with those themes and I prepared to defend our research plan.

Olivia emailed her principal, Susan, and assistant principal, Gabby, to inform them of our plans and to offer my contact information so we could schedule a time to meet. At this meeting I would outline the study and answer any questions from the administrators. I worked diligently to predict possible roadblocks. The application to conduct research
within this school district was extensive; below I provide the summary and research questions I submitted for consideration (Note: As mentioned, my research questions were revised during the inquiry):

The research goal is to gain insight into one teacher’s pedagogical process as she considers the influence of poverty on her students’ learning and strives to teach for social justice through the lens of equity. This research directly aligns with the district’s goals, as it will provide insight into pedagogical decision-making around issues of poverty and equity. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does a teacher negotiate teaching for social justice within an early childhood classroom? Specifically, how do the following aspects influence a teacher’s approach to teaching for social justice:

   - Personal experiences
   - School structures (district and school policies and infrastructures)
   - Members of the school community (colleagues, admin, families)
   - Students,
   - The adopted literacy curricula

2. In the midst of this negotiation, what becomes of the teacher’s pedagogy?

   The meeting with building administrators never happened. My application to conduct research in Olivia’s school was sent to Susan, the principal, for her approval and she granted it without question. Olivia had a handful of brief informal chats with Susan about the project and that was all her principal needed. Susan did not request to meet
with me. She clearly trusted Olivia to maintain her high quality of teaching, to do the best she could for her students, and opted to leave her alone.

While I was pleasantly surprised at the ease with which my research proposal was accepted, this seemed to demonstrate a lack of interest in our social justice work. Susan did permit this social justice oriented study to take place, which inherently supported the work, however, she did not seem not curious to learn more about it; she signed the approval and left us alone. Olivia admitted she didn’t know how Susan felt about her social justice focus; our shared assumption, was that she was indifferent to social justice teaching. Nonetheless, as soon as I received the final approval, Olivia, her students, and I began our work. Official data production commenced in March of 2016. However, from August to February, Olivia and I met in person six times to discuss her social justice teaching.

**Olivia**

Olivia is a black woman in her early thirties. She has a young daughter, who at the time of this study, was two years old. Olivia’s husband is a high school principal in the same Midwest college town; they are a well-respected family within the school district. As a friend, she is hilarious, honest, and reliable. As a teacher, she is dedicated, innovative, and involved. While I could further describe Olivia based on my observations and experiences with her, in this section I choose to use Olivia’s words to provide context for her social justice teaching.

As a relatively new teacher, Olivia did not hesitate to take on leadership roles within her district related to social justice. She was part of the district-initiated Equity Team, which she described as follows:
The Equity Team is a group of about 30 or so teachers, administrators and district employees that have undergone a 10 day training where we were immersed in the learning of diversity, social justice and inclusion. It begins with a three day retreat. We receive our training from NCCJ (National Conference for Community and Justice) in (a nearby large city). As trainers, we conduct equity sessions throughout the district in every building. We are also currently working with second and third year teachers on equity and diversity training (personal communication, November 28, 2016).

She also worked to recruit minorities to teach in her district. She explained,

The (minority recruitment) committee is tasked with recruiting teachers of color to (our district). We partner with the surrounding colleges and universities as well as the local high schools to track students interested in education early on. Last summer we choose 10 high school students interested in seeking education as a career and they participated in an internship where they worked side-by-side with area teachers elementary through high school for four weeks. We are currently still working out the kinks in the program and trying to make it more effective. We meet about once a month and the members include teachers, professors, the superintendent and members of (a community group) (personal communication, November 28, 2016).

Both of these committees required a time commitment outside of the basic school day. Olivia was willing to dedicate her time to initiatives like the Equity Team and the Minority Recruitment Committee because of her passion for the issues they addressed. Olivia described her experience as a minority within the district:
One of ten (black teachers) in elementary (schools within the district). You know, you are of course the minority. But then you have people make (biased) comments. You really want to help people further their knowledge on what’s acceptable, and I feel like if that’s something I struggle with and other adults struggle with, how do our kids feel in the classroom? And how are teachers that don’t have the same experiences and backgrounds as our students, how are they able to build those relationships and help them (students) be successful? And so, I just feel like that’s part of what motivates me to do this (social justice) work. And so being a woman, being black, being a minority, being one of the few black teachers in the district, I just feel like there is a ton of work that needs to be done just on the adult side of education. Until we fix that, we’re going to struggle in the classroom. So, I mean things put in place as far as equity, minority recruitment, I think the district is moving towards change. It’s going to take some time (interview, June 22, p. 7).

Olivia was committed not only to creating the space for her second grade students to explore equity issues, like race and homelessness, she was also concerned about how the adults in her school community understood privilege and bias. She questioned how adults could build relationships with students whose lives differed significantly from theirs. Instead of letting this question lay dormant, Olivia, through her committee work, took action to help recruit and maintain staff members who were willing to explore their own biases and teach about equity.
**The Classroom**

Beech Elementary first opened for the 2015-2016 school year. On the northeast side of town, it was created to accommodate the city’s growing population. It sat right next to the newest high school in the district (three years old when this research was conducted), in what was previously an empty field. Olivia’s classroom shared a hallway with the two other second grade classrooms and one first grade classroom.

Inside, her classroom walls displayed posters about reading (i.e., “3 Ways to Read a Book”) writing (i.e., steps to the writing process) and math (i.e., a hundreds chart). Class rules (i.e. “#1: Follow directions quickly”), class birthdays, and a monthly calendar were also posted. There was a bulletin board in the front of the room filled with Olivia’s personal photographs, making her daughter and husband familiar to the class. For students, there were six circle tables with three or four chairs at each, three single desks, and one table with two laptops. In a corner, there was a kidney-shaped table where Olivia conducted small group lessons. A colorful carpet sat in front of the SmartBoard where students gathered for read alouds and other instruction. Along one wall, there was counter with a sink and supplies students could access as needed, including crayons, glue, iPads, and headphones. A class library was filled with labeled bins of books, a furry blue rug, and two comfortable blue chairs providing a cozy reading space.

Olivia had several books on display on the whiteboard ledge, the tops of cabinets and the windowsill behind the kidney-shaped table used for small group instruction. The books were related to issues of equity and she kept them visible and available to students. She read these stories aloud to her class and changed the displays throughout the year,
based on topics of interest. (i.e., homelessness and race). She referred to them as “social justice books.” See Figures 3-6 for examples of books related to equity on display.

Figure 3: “Social justice books” on display on top of classroom cabinets.

Figure 4: “Social justice books” on display on the whiteboard ledge.

Figure 5: “Social justice books” on display on the windowsill.
I observed in Olivia’s classroom on Thursday mornings during literacy instruction and on Friday afternoons for social justice read aloud time. Olivia and I discussed our schedules and decided that these times of the week would work well for me to be in her classroom. On Thursdays, I observed her literacy instruction. This helped me to gain familiarity with her students and an understanding of how their classroom operated, specifically during literacy instruction. It also allowed me to think with Olivia about possible ways to include/embed social justice instruction during this time.

I observed on Friday afternoons because this was Olivia’s specific social justice read aloud time; the consistent time each week when she created space for her students to explore sociopolitical topics. Being present for this allowed me to record and transcribe class discussions. These transcripts served as points of reflection for Olivia and me, produced rich data for analysis, and helped to create the class audit trail, a visual representation of student learning.

A standard morning began with a morning meeting. Students typically gathered in a circle on the rug and talked about how the day would go. From there, the literacy block started. Olivia used a center system, where the class was divided into five different groups who engaged in particular literacy activities (i.e., guided reading with Olivia, independent reading time, word work). Olivia projected the rotation schedule on the
Smartboard and students dispersed to their assigned locations. About fifteen minutes later, the groups rotated. After this portion of the morning, whole group writing started. Students again gathered on the rug and Olivia taught a mini-lesson to guide their writing work for the day (i.e., using voice). After writing, it was time for the day’s Special (i.e., Art or Music). Students lined up at the door and Olivia escorted them to their next class.

On Friday afternoons, social justice read aloud time began directly after recess. Students returned to the classroom after playing outside and knew to sit on the rug so Olivia could begin reading. The class listened to and discussed the book of the day (along with videos or other resources Olivia provided on the particular topic) until it was time for dismissal.

**Olivia’s Students**

In January 2016, Olivia had 21 students. At my observation on March 22, she told me a girl joined the class, bringing the total to 22. When I arrived on April 7, I learned one boy moved away and another new girl arrived, keeping the total at 22 students. On April 7, Olivia’s class was comprised of 12 boys and 10 girls. Of those 22 students, 10 were white (four boys, six girls), nine were black (five boys, four girls), two were mixed race (one boy, one girl), and one was Hispanic (boy). This closely resembled the school demographics. See Table 1 for information about the population at Olivia’s school.
### Table 1: 2016 Demographics for Beech Elementary (Retrieved from district website Jan. 14, 2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total enrolled</th>
<th>% Free or reduced lunch</th>
<th>% white</th>
<th>% black</th>
<th>% multi-racial</th>
<th>% Hispanic</th>
<th>% Asian</th>
<th>% Pacific</th>
<th>% Asian Pacific Islander</th>
<th>% Pacific Islander</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>391</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>44.25</td>
<td>39.13</td>
<td>8.95</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Olivia’s Pedagogical Journey**

The following chapters in this dissertation tell my version of Olivia’s journey to teach for social justice during the 2015-2016 school year. You will read details of the research methodology I used, consuming information about the theory and data that mingled together to offer fresh insights. You will meet some of Olivia’s students and colleagues, and you will get to know her better, too. As you engage with this work, I encourage you to listen closely to Olivia’s words, to linger over her students’ questions, and to consider the challenges and benefits of teaching young children to consider multiple perspectives and to redesign the world in more equitable ways.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Thinking with Theory

This study was designed around what Jackson and Mazzei (2012) call “thinking with theory.” Frustrated by the reductive nature of coding and a lack of literature around alternative analytical techniques in qualitative research, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) offer thinking with theory as an analytical option. This is a process of analysis that puts methodology and theory into conversation; a process that disrupts conventional methods by working “within and against interpretivism” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. viii, emphasis in original).

According to the authors, “… qualitative data interpretation and analysis does not happen via mechanistic coding, reducing data to themes, and writing up transparent narratives that do little to critique the complexities of social life; such simplistic approaches preclude dense and multi-layered treatment of data” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. vii). Jackson and Mazzei (2012) argue that “thinking with theory across data illustrates how knowledge is opened up and proliferated rather than foreclosed and simplified” (p. vii). In order to do this work, researchers develop analytical questions (tied to specific theoretical concepts) that emerge while reading and rereading data and theory. Analytical questions work in service to the larger research questions that guide the study; researchers engage analytical questions with the data as they seek new understandings.

In an effort to keep theory not only present, but active during all parts of inquiry, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) advise researchers to “use theory to think with their data (or use data to think with theory” (p. vii, emphasis in original). The authors suggest
imagining the scholar upon whose theory you draw is leaning over your shoulder as you analyze data. What might he/she ask? In order to narrow the scope, consider what specific concept from a designated theory will best open up the possibilities of each research question. What question(s) aligned with this theoretical concept might you (and the respective theorist) ask of the data? Thinking with theory not only acknowledges the complexities of data, but purposefully stays immersed in them by engaging in analytical conversations rooted in theory. Rather than centering participants in an effort to reveal themes and patterns, thinking with theory is about “cutting into the center, opening it up to see what newness may be incited” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. viii).

This idea of newness was appealing to me; it signaled an uncharted path and I liked that visual. In my experience with comprehensive coding (limited to a graduate class project), I read and reread data and named and renamed codes which became larger categories which eventually became themes. Theory was pinned to data excerpts, holding them still in specific places, away from alternative understandings. For me, it made the study seem linear; the analysis process was step-by-step and the knowledge gained was not surprising. While I cannot say if different insights would have been elicited if thinking with theory was used during this class exercise, the process of coding felt limiting to me. I felt like I already knew what I was looking for; I just had to find it. As a novice researcher, I wanted to engage a method of data analysis other than coding to see what/if newness was produced.

This effort to get into the “center” and incite “newness” aligned with my research goals. When I asked, “How does a teacher negotiate teaching for social justice within an early childhood classroom?” I was not necessarily looking for predictable themes or
patterns. Instead, I sought fresh insights into the experience of teaching for social justice in an early childhood classroom, specifically around the flow of power as it swirled through and from the teacher. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) explain that in their study of the professional experiences of first generation female academics, they could have easily created a list of findings based on what is already known including their own experiences as women in the academy. “Imposter syndrome” and the “double standards in the treatment of men and women” may be derived as major themes (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 9). However, these findings would not offer fresh understandings. Essentially a study is not needed in order to talk about these findings; it doesn’t produce newness.

Similarly, I was an early childhood teacher negotiating teaching for social justice (through the critical literacy framework) and have read about, lived, studied, and discussed this issue for years. Before even entering the inquiry space, I could list predictable patterns including: anxiety about introducing sensitive topics like racism to a group of young children; personal commitment to the work that trumps imposed curricular guidelines; constant indecision around how to plan/implement/follow up on student-driven inquiry. These kinds of patterns, however, were not what I sought with this study. I wanted to understand how different actors and factors and the swirl of power impacted Olivia’s unique pedagogical journey. I wanted to learn what I (and perhaps the larger early childhood literacy field) did not already know.

In the next section, I provide further description of the specific processes of crafting analytical memos and plugging in – key parts of thinking with theory. I also return to the study about the experiences of two first generation female academics to demonstrate the process of thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). After that, I
detail my specific experience of thinking with theory, including how I changed my theoretical lens in the midst of the study and how I engaged data and theory in an effort to produce something new.

**Analytical Memos**

Thinking with theory is an emergent process, thus a key aspect is to record how analysis unfolds. In order to do so, throughout the inquiry while engaged in data production and analysis, it is crucial to maintain diligent analytical memos. Documenting the process of thinking with theory and data during and after each experience doing so helps to make analysis transparent. A researcher’s thinking may bring to mind different theoretical concepts from which to draw or different directions of inquiry to pursue. Recording analytical steps and purposefully writing about thinking throughout the process of the inquiry documents the emergent methodology.

**An Example**

Jackson and Mazzei (2012) organized their seminal book around interview data produced during a study on first generation female academics. Each chapter used transcripts from two participants, Cassandra and Sera, and demonstrated how the authors thought with different theories in order to produce new understandings. Chapters revolved around specific theoretical concepts from Derrida, Spivak, Foucault, Butler, Delueze, and Barad. To begin each of these chapters, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) included schematic cues, the brief explanations of the designated key concepts of each theory, in order to support readers in making sense of the analysis that followed.

Jackson and Mazzei explained that they settled in with each theorist to create analytical questions by imagining what those scholars would ask of the data. For Jackson
and Mazzei, analytical questions served to keep meaning from becoming static. Crafted in collaboration with the (imagined) theorist, the authors selected the concepts from each theory they believed would help complicate their thinking, thus pushing it to new limits. Based on these concepts, analytical questions emerged in process and began the dialogue between the theory and data. Analytical questions were different from research questions for this reason. While research questions guided the larger inquiry, analytical questions were theory-and-data-focused and functioned to contribute to understandings once engaged in the research.

For example, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) interviewed first generation female academics in a study that asked these research questions:

1. What is the importance given to life events and/or individuals in the participants’ decisions to pursue first undergraduate, then graduate study?
2. How have participants negotiated entry, survival, and advancement in the academy?
3. What have they learned as a result of forging new territory without familial/social role models?
4. How do they understand/articulate multiple identities? (p. x)

When thinking with Foucault, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) chose to engage his concept of power/knowledge with the data. After reading through the data several times, they determined that Foucault’s writing around power relations connected with the content of the interview transcripts. Power/knowledge became the key concept that produced the analytical question: “How do power/knowledge relations and practices produce Cassandra’s and Sera’s multiple subjectivities as they venture into the academy as first-
generation professors?” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 8). This question supported the larger research focus and helped to push the authors’ thinking in new directions. What is important to note is that Jackson and Mazzei (2012) argue that analytical questions evolve while plugging in (a process discussed below). This means that data is already available and has been read and reread several times.

**Plugging In**

Thinking with theory happens through the process of “plugging in”. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) were introduced to this phrase by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) who wrote, “When one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work” (as cited in Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 1). When thinking with theory, literary machines are texts including interview data, theory, qualitative methods books, data, and so forth that are plugged into theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Jackson and Mazzei (2012) conceptualize “plugging in” as a constant and continuous process that produces something new. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) describe their experiences as follows:

…the theory was in ourselves, but something different happened in the moments of plugging in. We characterize this reading-the-data-while-thinking-the-theory as a moment of plugging in, of entering the assemblage, of making new connectives. We began to realize how plugging in creates a different relationship among texts; they constitute one another and in doing so create something new” (p. 4, emphasis in original).

According to Jackson and Mazzei, plugging in takes place in an assemblage. An assemblage is the “process of making and unmaking” things (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p.
13, emphasis in original). It is not a thing itself, but rather it is the process of connecting and arranging. It is through this process that something(s) new is produced from thinking with theory and data. To enter the assemblage is to invite new ways for theory and data to collaborate as theoretical concepts mix with participants’ words, field notes, reflective and analytical memos, and artifacts. Fresh ideas and connections are made and unmade as theory is continuously plugged into data and vice versa.

While drafting analytical questions and memos, designating theoretical key concepts, and plugging in are all key to thinking with theory, the process is not step-by-step. Reading and rereading theory and data, may spark new insights causing analytic questions or key concepts to be revised. Or, perhaps, in the midst of data production, a researcher may choose to pursue the scholarship of a different theorist instead. Analysis is not necessarily a search for patterns between the theory and data, but rather for fresh insights and new ways of thinking about concepts and events.

**Beginning the Study**

**Assumptions and Purpose**

For this inquiry, I focused on one teacher, Olivia, and her journey toward social justice teaching in an early childhood classroom. Through the production of data including classroom observations and artifacts (i.e., assignments, student work), reflective memos, audio recordings and transcriptions of conversations with Olivia, and video recordings of social justice themed read alouds, I learned about her pedagogical process.

The data sources that consistently caught my attention and pushed my thinking were my conversations with Olivia. It is important to note that as Olivia and I spoke
about her quest to become a social justice educator, I operated under the assumption that she had already interpreted her experiences and thus re-told them to me through her own filter. I am not asserting that her words provide a complete and final “truth,” rather the data produced through our discussions was partial (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). During analysis, I wove theory through her words aiming for tentative and incomplete insights. This inquiry was not designed to provide absolute answers to my research questions or concrete “findings” that could be transferred to any educational setting. Rather, I explored one person’s experience with the hope that it might illuminate the complicated process of teaching for social justice, while also offering inspiration and guidance for those interested in teaching critically.

**Initial Theoretical Perspectives**

In order to be transparent about my research process, it is important I describe the theoretical shift that took place once I was immersed in data production. This study was originally conceptualized through the lenses of *literacy as a critical social practice* and *critical sociocultural theory*. As a researcher and educator interested in the literacy experiences of children in early childhood classrooms, these theories provided routes to understanding Olivia’s pedagogical journey with an emphasis on the literacy practices in her classroom. I offer brief descriptions of each theory below.

*Literacy as a critical social practice* is a theory that informs critical literacy (Larson & Marsh, 2005). While not attributed to one specific scholar, this stance implies that literacy is defined by power relations that are unequal and ideological (Luke & Freebody, 1999). People hold a multitude of literate identities that are shaped by life experiences. These ways of talking, acting, being, and valuing are dependent upon local
contexts and experiences and not all are in line with dominant means of communication or behavior which, in turn, leads to unequal access to literacy (Vasquez, Egawa, Harste, & Thompson, 2004).

Lewis (2001) takes a sociopolitical view when she names literacy practices as social acts. For her, literacy practices are social because they are enacted through the interactions of people with social histories and statuses, and because texts position readers through social codes. The differential power held by these histories, statuses, and codes within and outside of the classroom reveals the political side to literacy (Lewis, 2001). In my dissertation proposal, I argued that this acknowledgement of the power ingrained in literacy practices adds a critical element to the lens of literacy as a social practice.

The creation of critical sociocultural theory is an attempt to extend the work of sociocultural theory. Dissatisfied with its scope, Lewis and Moje (2003) add a critical element and are the key scholars advocating for this perspective. The basic assumptions of critical sociocultural theory are that: 1) power, identity, and agency impact learning and knowledge production and must be explicitly analyzed and 2) macro-systems of power are tied to micro-systems (social to individual; global to local; institutional to the everyday). (Lewis & Moje, 2003).

While I do find these theories help extend my thinking about critical literacy in early childhood settings, when immersed in Olivia’s pedagogical journey through our conversations and classroom observations, my focus shifted from her specific literacy practices to how power swirled around and through her, influencing her journey to teach for social justice. At times the effects of this swirl of power encouraged her social justice
agenda, while at others they discouraged it. I use the word “swirl,” because that’s the image I had in mind when I thought about the exercises of power happening around and within her. (This metaphor is extended in Chapter 3.)

I listened closely as Olivia talked about her personal experiences and motivations that solidified her commitment to social justice oriented teaching. At the same time, her personal memories, actions by her students, the superintendent of the district, the building administrators, families, and the school media specialist informed her pedagogy. In order to track these micro-practices of power, I sought a different theoretical orientation.

**Shifting From a Critical to a Post-Structural Stance toward Power**

To demonstrate my theoretical transition, it is important I discuss my understanding of power at the beginning of this study. I entered into this study with a critical lens; I was interested in how power impacted Olivia’s commitment to social justice teaching. When teaching from a critical literacy standpoint, the questions I often asked my students were framed around who had power and who did not (i.e., when discussing literature); through my graduate school courses, I gained a deeper understanding of critical social theory. Furthermore, in my personal life, I adopt a critical lens and whether watching a commercial on television or reading the news, consider, for example how marginalized groups (i.e., Muslims, women, people of color) are represented and who benefits from such representations. Over time, my critical theoretical lens has been honed by some foundational critical scholars including (but not limited to) Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and Paulo Freire. To contextualize my critical understanding of power, I offer a brief explanation of these scholars’ contributions to my thinking. After that, I explain my shift in perspective.
Karl Marx: Capitalism and Class Domination

Karl Marx (1818-1883) specifically critiqued capitalism and its relation to class domination (Levinson, 2011). Marx examined the effects of larger scale social structures and how they marginalized workers. His asserted that through capitalism workers were alienated and existed primarily as cogs in a machine to produce goods for the financial benefit of their bosses. Marx predicted an eventual revolution would emancipate the working class, overturn society, and initiate communism, thereby abolishing private property and distributing power equitably (Levinson, Gross, Link, & Hanks, 2011). His focus was clearly economic as he worked to reveal the oppression of class domination. One of his lasting contributions to critical social theory is the notion that political and economic systems perpetuate the status quo. These structures work to ensure that the rich remain rich and the poor remain poor (Dressman, 2008).

Marx helped me to think through economic implications of oppression and the possibility of revolution. This connects to tenets of critical literacy – interrogating the status quo (why is society arranged around the have-haves and have-nots), valuing multiple perspectives (what are the experiences of working class people) and to act to in the name of justice (a revolution). While communism is not the ideal solution to class inequities, Marx is a foundational critical scholar whose work helped to shape my understanding of privilege and oppression.

Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) acknowledged the social aspects of domination. He introduced the concepts of “common sense” and “good sense” when he deciphered how societal structures imparted dominance on daily life. Gramsci (1971) defined common
sense as the inherited general assumptions shared by members of any society, whereas
good sense is what one gains from experience and critique. The juxtaposition of these two
kinds of knowledge results in “contradictory consciousness” which is when thought and
action are inconsistent. For example, Gramsci wondered how factory workers who knew
all too well the brutality of industrial capitalism never organized in an effort to improve
their working conditions. In contrast, these workers continued to arrive at work each
morning and perform their assigned duties, thereby validating an oppressive system (Gross,
2011). This demonstrated a stark contrast between thought and action. Circumstances
such as these often lead to apathy, which in turn, leads to consent (Gross, 2011).

This idea of contradictory consciousness relates directly to Gramsci’s notion of
hegemony. Hegemony is the power exerted by dominant groups over subordinate groups,
whether it is economic, cultural, or social (Gramsci, 1971). Consent is a key. The
subjugated group offers a sense of legitimacy to the powerful, allowing them to influence
general common sense (Gross, 2011). The structures in place are set up in such a way that
tacit acceptance and maintenance of them is understood. In fact, the presence of such
structures, including culture and ideology, may not even be noticed by the very people they
oppress (Gross, 2011). Essentially, Gramsci posited that dominant groups exert their
influence over those with less power and are rarely challenged.

Gramsci’s work inspired me to teach my students to be critical thinkers – to
consider how texts and language position them, how social identities are enforced through
language, and that, most importantly, they have the ability to challenge and redesign their
worlds.
**Paulo Freire: Banking Versus Problem Posing Education**

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a major contributor to critical theory and its relation to education. Drawing upon his experiences as a poor child in Brazil, his work aimed to promote emancipatory practices for the poor. He looked specifically to education as a perpetuator of the status quo. Freire (2000) described the “banking” model of education as when teachers treat students as receptacles into which they deposit knowledge. This classroom approach creates wide boundaries between teacher and student. Freire (2000) wrote, “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing (p. 72). This process of “banking” abolishes creativity and critique as students adapt to become passive beings. According to Freire (2000), this was a form of oppression.

Freire observed that the oppressed are seen as society’s problems that must be fixed. Rather than limiting the potential of a group of people through a deficit perspective, Freire argued that the oppressed are, in fact, important members of society. The issue is not how to “fix” people, rather the focus should be on transforming society so that the presence and participation of the marginalized are validated (Freire, 2000). In order to make this sort of change within society, people must engage in praxis, or action and reflection. He asserted that liberation is praxis and can transform the world. (Freire, 2000).

Like Gramsci, Freire warned of the dangers of hegemony, common sense, good sense, and contradictory consciousness. He advocated for problem posing education where teacher/student boundaries fade and students become critical co-investigators in dialogue; constantly unveiling reality. Freire (2000) believed that when students were confronted with issues that relate to themselves and their worlds, they would be motivated to respond.
As such, students must be taught to read the word and the world (Freire, 1998). Freire helped to explicitly imagine and create emancipatory practices in classrooms of all ages.

Freire’s work is significant to my understanding of critical social theory because he applied it to teaching. His argument for problem-posing versus banking education, along with his call to read the word and the world helped me to conceptualize my own pedagogical practices, attempting to create a classroom environment steeped in collaboration and mutual respect, as opposed to one defined by obedience. His work helped me to be actively aware of power relations among my students and me.

The concepts put forth by these scholars: class domination and maintenance, critical consciousness, hegemony, and problem-posing education influence my thinking regarding how power operates. This approach describes an oppressor/oppressed binary meaning that those who have power wield it and impose suffering upon others.

**Enter Foucault**

As my interest shifted from Olivia’s literacy practices toward the swirl of power around through, and from her, I expanded my theoretical reading. I sought theoretical support for thinking through Olivia’s navigation of the actors and factors around her. I noticed that her reactions to both encouragement and challenges to her social justice teaching demonstrated the swirl of power coming from her and worked to advance her pedagogical goals.

Interested in Foucault’s thinking about power from my graduate coursework, specifically that power does not rest within the hierarchy, but flows through sets of relations, I sought literature that applied his work in early childhood settings. I read Glenda MacNaughton’s (2000; 2005) books that united post-structural theories and early
childhood education. Her research on the system of governance within the field of early childhood education challenged universal truths. Influenced by Foucault, MacNaughton (2005) wrote, “Once we understand how power operates through ideologies to oppress and constrain in our particular social and political contexts, we can begin to understand what needs to change and why” (p. 11).

This connected to my thinking about Olivia’s quest to teach for social justice. I was interested in how Olivia navigated the exercises of power enacted in relation to her social justice work. I wanted to understand how power might restrict and/or support her social justice agenda and also how her exercises of power might redesign, interrupt, or otherwise resist oppressive actions. Olivia knew that planning learning engagements around sociopolitical issues was outside of normed teaching methods in her school building. This was evidenced in the care we took to frame our study in a way that would be approved by the administration. Expecting our social justice agenda to be challenged, we were purposeful in the way we presented the study, being sure to explicitly link our work to the district-wide goals of equity and poverty. Olivia charted her own curricular path focused on equity and redesigned how she could “be” an early childhood teacher. I was interested in the role power played throughout this process, how exercises of power worked to support and/or hinder her goals.

To further understand Olivia’s pedagogical negotiation, I wanted to gain a more nuanced understanding of Foucault’s thinking around power. The more I read (Foucault, 1977; 1978; 1980), the more my understanding of how power operates shifted. There are three key Foucauldian concepts about power that caused me to transition from a critical perception of power to a post-structural lens in order to gain insight into Olivia’s
pedagogical journey: power as flowing through sets of relations (as opposed to being possessed by a select group of elites); power as productive (not solely repressive); and the need to analyze power’s multiple effects (instead of its point of origin). Below, I discuss each of these key points and explain how they supported my thinking.

**Power as Flowing**

Foucault (1980) posits that power does not only belong to people with high status. In fact, he argues that power cannot “belong” to anyone. Foucault conceptualizes power as something that is not possessed. He writes,

…power is not to be taken to be a phenomenon of one individual’s consolidated and homogenous domination over others, or that of one group or class over others. What, by contrast, should always be kept in mind is that power, if we do not take too distant a view of it, is not that which makes the difference between those who exclusively possess and retain it, and those who do not have it and submit to it. Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something that only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth (Foucault, 1980, p. 98).

Power is not possessed; it is exercised. This conceptualization has liberating under tones. If power is not possessed, that means that it is not reserved solely for the rich and privileged members of society. No one can hold power and make it their own, keeping it for themselves to distribute through acts of oppression. Rather everyone keeps the swirl of power in motion. This conceptualization helped me focus my attention on what exercises of power *produced* within and around Olivia as opposed to how exercises
of power *oppressed* her social justice goals. In other words, my focus was understanding power as a swirl that moved through sets of relations all day long, instead of as a force imposed upon her.

Foucault also says that power flows among people through daily interactions, and in doing so seeps into the body. He writes, “…power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes, and everyday lives” (1980, p. 39). This is further evidence of the flow of power. When an exercise of power swirls from one person toward another, (i.e., administrator approval for a social justice research project), the effect of that power is internalized and acted upon (i.e., a teacher plans social justice oriented lessons) and the flow continues (i.e., students learn about racial segregation and begin to notice inequity in their own lives). Power is not given, taken, or exchanged, nor does it sit in stillness; it is always in motion (Foucault, 1980).

This conceptualization of power in motion, what I call the “swirl of power,” guided my thinking about how when Olivia struggled against forces of power, she herself became of vehicle of power (Foucault, 1980). Foucault (1980) writes,

> Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (p. 98).

Power swirled through and from Olivia through sets of relations. Through her relationships with her past (personal memories), her principal, the school media
specialist, her students, and the superintendent, she engaged in exercises of power that produced something(s) within and around her. Understanding Olivia to be a “vehicle of power” helped me to pay attention to how her responses to various factors (i.e., administrators’ tacit support for her social justice work) were her own exercises of power intended to further her social justice goals.

**Power as Productive, Not Solely Repressive**

Foucault (1978; 1980), conceptualizes power as productive and explores what it creates as it flows through sets of relations. As someone immersed in critical scholarship, adopting the lens of power as productive is a fresh stance. Typically, as discussed above, critical theorists (i.e. Freire, Gramsci, Marx) differentiate between those with power (the oppressors) and those without (the oppressed). According to these scholars, those within the hierarchy use their power to subjugate groups of people. Foucault’s work interrupts this binary by acknowledging the productive nature of power.

In the *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978), Foucault talks about power in terms of the repression of sex. Sex is deemed something to conceal, to keep private, to be reserved for heterosexual married couples for the purpose of contributing to the labor force. However, when people talk about sex or act in sexually deviant ways, they are essentially “defying established power” (p. 6). He considers,

> Do the workings of power, and in particular those mechanisms that are brought into play in societies such as ours, really belong primarily to the category of repression? Are prohibition, censorship, and denial truly the forms through which power is exercised in a general way, if not in every society, most certainly our own? (1978, p. 10).
Here, Foucault questions the purpose of power. Is power used most often to repress? He acknowledges that many people would argue it does.

The questions to be posed would then be these: if power is exercised, what sort of exercise does it involve? In what does it consist? What is its mechanism? There is an immediate answer that many contemporary analyses would appear to offer: power is essentially that which represses. Power represses nature, the instincts, a class, individuals… In any case it has become almost automatic in the parlance of the times to define power as an organ of repression (1980, pp. 89-90).

There is certainly evidence of repressive effects of power, as demonstrated by Foucault’s (1978) discussion around sexuality and the work of Marx and Engels (1848), Gramsci (1971), and Freire (2000). However, Foucault suggests that repression invites deviance. If someone is told, “No, you may not be/act/think/talk/dress like that,” that order seeps into her body and produces something that leads to a response. The response may be in line with the imposed rule or may rebel against it. Power swirls from individuals, creates something new, and travels onward.

This conceptualization is helpful because it released me from the oppressed/oppressor stance and instead drove me to see power as productive. Rather than focusing on how Olivia was limited by expressions of power, I focused on how Olivia responded to expressions of power, thereby continuing its flow. While some may say researchers are supposed to enter the research space as neutral parties, not holding expectations for what will be revealed through data production, I admit as I crafted my proposal, I expected Olivia’s social justice work would be held back by the actors and factors around her. Based on my background in critical literacy and studying critical
theories, I conceptualized those with power as oppressive, as likely to enact decisions misaligned with social justice pedagogy. I expected to be challenged by Susan, the building principal, as she reviewed my application to conduct research in her school. I envisioned the uphill battle Olivia and I would engage in to implement social justice teaching opportunities, predicting conflict with families, colleagues, and administrators. While this didn’t happen in the ways I envisioned, I expected resistance based on my theoretical positioning.

Transitioning my stance had a visceral impact. I felt lighter, in many ways. I no longer engaged in this research with the imagined weight of conflict on my shoulders. I no longer expected that challenges would end or interrupt the study, and if they did, the goal was to learn something, as opposed to focusing on the oppressive results.

**Analyzing the Effects of Power**

Foucault argues against seeking to understand the intent behind exercises of power. Instead, he says that the multiple effects of power should be the focus of analysis. He writes,

…analysis should not concern itself with power at the level of conscious intention or decision; that it should not attempt to consider power from its internal point of view and that it should refrain from posing the labyrinth and unanswerable question: ‘Who then has power and what has he in mind? What is the aim of someone who possesses power?’ Instead it is a case of studying power at the point where its intention, if it has one, is completely invested in its real and effective practices. What is needed is a study of power in its external visage, at the point where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that which we can
provisionally call its object, its target, its field of application, there – that is to say – where it installs itself and produces its real effects (1980, p. 97).

Approaching analysis with a focus on the effects of power prompted me to ask what exercises of power produced within and around Olivia. As I studied her journey of social justice teaching, part of what I sought to learn was about how she negotiated potential challenges along the way. My focus on the deployment of power and its multiple effects guided my thinking about how Olivia was always in the process of achieving her social justice goals. The social relations and cultural practices through which power was exercised contributed to her journey.

When thinking about deriving a theory of power, Foucault (1980) cautions,

> If one tries to erect a theory of power one will always be obliged to view it as emerging at a given place and hence to deduce it, to reconstruct its genesis. But if power is in reality an open, more-or-less coordinated (in the event, no doubt ill-coordinated) cluster of relations, then the only problem is to provide oneself with a grid of analysis which makes possible an analytic of relations of power” (pp. 198-199).

Foucault (1980) explains that historical explanations of power mark the moment when certain people took hold of it, leading to the immediate binary of oppressors and oppressed. Rather than wrestling with the point of origin, he suggests effort to more closely examine the multiple effects of the movement of power.

With this in mind, I looked for how and where exercises of power arose, how they materialized, and what their effects were (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) in the context of Olivia’s social justice goals. Her negotiation of the relationships that impacted her work
were ongoing and the purpose of this inquiry was to think through what the swirl of power and its multiple effects produced within and around her. That is to say, when thinking with Foucault and the data, I considered how power worked on, through, and from Olivia, complicating the oppressor/oppressed binary.

Foucault’s work is rarely used as a lens in studies of critical literacy in early childhood settings. MacNaughton (2005) notes, “Despite Foucault’s deep and continuing influence in diverse fields of study, early childhood students rarely meet Foucault’s work, or the work of poststructuralist thinkers, it’s hard to find, for example, Foucault’s ideas of ‘disciplinary power’, ‘docile bodies’, and ‘power/knowledge’ in mainstream early childhood text” (p. 5). Transitioning from a critical stance toward a post-structural understanding of power offers a fresh perspective to critical literacy scholarship in early childhood education.

Description of the Research Process

My Role in Olivia’s Classroom

My primary form of involvement with Olivia and her students was to help Olivia think through her social justice oriented lessons. Before gaining my university’s Institutional Review Board and district-level approval for the study, Olivia and I met several times in the fall and winter of 2015 to brainstorm how to incorporate sociopolitical issues into her curriculum. I shared resources with her, listened to how things were going, and offered suggestions. These were informal conversations between two friends with similar professional interests.

Once official data production began in March of 2016, I spent one morning and one afternoon in her classroom observing each week. (See Table 2 for a detailed
accounting of my time in Olivia’s classroom.) I was a helpful observer (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) and offered students assistance when needed, but generally stayed quiet and off to the side. On Thursday mornings, I was there for the literacy block. Here, I observed and took field notes on literacy centers including guided reading lessons. I also witnessed whole group writing lessons and independent work times. After the morning literacy block, the students went to Specials, such as Art or Music class. If Olivia had the time, we engaged in conversation during this 40 minute block, talking through how things were going with her social justice work. I audio-recorded these conversations and all were transcribed by a close contact.

Friday afternoons were Olivia’s designated social justice read aloud times. Again, I acted as a helpful observer, responding to students if they initiated conversation and on a few occasions filling in for Olivia when she had to briefly step out of the classroom. I video recorded social justice read alouds and transcribed them myself. I took field notes during classroom observations and wrote reflective memos directly afterwards. On three occasions, Olivia and I met off-site to engage in longer more formal interviews about her social justice agenda. This happened for the first time before I began observing in her classroom, the second was mid-study, and the third was after the school year ended. (See Table 2 for specific dates.) These were also audio recorded. All of my conversations with Olivia were transcribed by a close contact. When citing Olivia in this dissertation, I differentiate between “conversations,” which took place informally in her classroom after an observation and “interviews,” which were longer, more structured, and took place off school grounds. I re-listened to each recording and revised and edited the transcripts as needed. Table 2 is a detailed description of data production.
Table 2: *Data Production*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Informal non-recorded meetings with Olivia (pre-IRB- all outside of school hours -checking in with how social justice lessons were going, planning for our work together; Olivia signed an IRB approved consent form allowing me to use data from conversations she and I had before gaining official IRB approval of the study) | • Sept. 18  
• Sept. 29  
• Nov. 19  
• Dec. 10  
• Dec. 21  
• Feb. 12 | 6     |
| Recorded and transcribed conversations post-observations (IRB approved)    | • March 4  
• March 17  
• March 24  
• April 7  
• April 14  
• April 21 | 6     |
| Recorded and transcribed formal interviews                                | • Jan 28  
• March 31  
• June 22 | 3     |
| Recurring interview questions                                              | • How do you define “social justice?”      |       |
|                                                                            | • What do you want your kids to leave your classroom with? What do you think they have left with? |       |
|                                                                            | • What kinds of things hold you back/encourage you (in relation to social justice teaching)? |       |
| Classroom observations (field notes & reflective memos)                   | • Jan 14 (pre-IRB)  
• Jan 15 (pre-IRB)  
• Feb. 25 (distributed IRB consent forms to students) | 19    |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Videos of read alouds & discussions**
- March 17/18
  - Freedom on the Menu
  - Separate is Never Equal
- April 8
  - Happy to be Nappy
- April 15
  - Roberto Clemente: Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates
- April 29/May 6
  - Goin’ Someplace Special
- May 13
  - Discussion on what is fair/unfair in our society

**Audio of guided reading**
- April 7: Voices in the Park

**Audio-only of read aloud**
- April 8: Happy to be Nappy

**Reality of classroom life – missed days in the field**
- March 10 → field trip
- March 11 → Olivia out
- March 31 and April 1 → Spring break
- April 22 → Olivia out
- April 28 – my doctor’s appointment
- May 5 → Olivia out (Equity training)
- May 19 → field trip
My Emergent Process of Analysis

In order to become familiar with the data, after each classroom observation, I completed the same routine: sitting in my car directly after leaving Olivia’s classroom, I wrote a reflective memo in a notebook, documenting questions, noticings, and wonderings about what I had just seen. After that, I listened to any audio I had recorded that day (social justice read alouds or conversations with Olivia). While listening, I noted excerpts that caught my attention in my field notebook. For example, “March 4, conversation after school with Olivia - exploring the Book Room.” This initial listening to the audio allowed me to flag certain segments of our discussion for further review.

After writing a reflective memo and annotating the day’s recording, I drove home. Upon arrival, I immediately uploaded the audio file so it could be transcribed by a close contact. He sent me the complete transcriptions via email within two days. Once I received them, I read the transcriptions while re-listening to the audio for accuracy and revised and edited as needed. I kept a clean version of each transcription and also printed a copy on which to write. I highlighted, underlined, and circled points of particular interest, and jotted notes in the margins. My notes included follow-up questions to ask Olivia, current insights, general questions about the inquiry, and noticings that related to my research questions and theoretical lens. I copied significant data excerpts into my analytic notebook with the date, the topic of conversation, the direct quote of interest, and its location on the transcript. For example, “Olivia_Interview_4_March 24: power of the audit trail – (kids) want to see their names on the wall – ‘I have something to say’ (lines 43-48).”
While engaged in the process of data analysis, I read. In the beginning of the study, I read about the literacy theories I initially called upon (i.e., Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Lewis & Moje, 2003) and took notes in my analytic notebook. My focus on power was clear early on and as my theoretical stance shifted, I laid Foucault’s thinking alongside literacy scholars like Lewis, et al. (2007). These notes sat next to data excerpts, providing the initial site of data and theory mingling. Figures 7 and 8 are examples of analytic memos.

Figure 7: Analytic memo about Foucault and critical sociocultural theory (“CSCT”) (March 4)
As time moved on and I continued this process, my focus on power remained while my interest in specific literacy practices weakened. I recorded my thinking in my analytic notebook,

Might it be possible to trace the many iterations of power that influence her (Olivia) work? I keep thinking about how so many things are swirling around her – encouraging and discouraging her social justice work. What theory would I need to read? Foucault on power (Laura analytical memo, April 11).

Eventually, a Foucauldian lens was the primary perspective that mingled with data excerpts in my notebook. Figure 9 shows an analytic memo that puts Foucault’s work in conversation with the data.
I continued this process throughout my time in Olivia’s classroom – reading theory, reading data, plugging one into the other, all the while recording my thinking. As the period of data production came to an end (final day was June 22), my review of the data became more comprehensive. In an effort to craft analytical questions, I re-read and annotated all my field notes, then did the same with all my notes on Foucault’s and MacNaughton’s writing. On May 18, I started a visual map.

**Visual Mapping**

While reading about Foucault’s conceptualizations of power along with the data (i.e., reflective memos, transcripts, field notes), I wanted to create some sort of organizational structure to help me think with the data and theory. I decided to produce a visual map that would allow me to physically lay data and theory next to each other on a larger canvas. The data that I was most interested in were transcripts from my
conversations with Olivia. I found that listening to her interpretation of her experience provided the most insight into her journey.

To begin the visual map, I read and re-read the typed transcripts of our discussions and wrote excerpts that caught my attention by hand on chart paper. Later, I reflected, “It is helpful to hand write Olivia’s quotes from interviews. I can hear her voice and think more about her words as I write them down” (Laura, analytical memo, June 30). I grouped these data by the subgroups related to my first research question:

1. How does a teacher negotiate teaching for social justice within an early childhood classroom? Specifically, how do the following aspects influence a teacher’s approach to teaching for social justice:

   - Personal experiences
   - Members of the school community
     - Superintendent
     - Building principal and assistant principal
     - Families
     - Students
     - Media specialist

   For example, Olivia’s quotes related to her negotiation of the superintendent’s actions were written under the heading “superintendent.” While, at times, this felt similar to coding, I did not stop my analysis by grouping the data into categories. If coding, I might have focused on the patterns within each category and then developed themes in order to yield findings. When thinking with theory, however, this map provided the visual
that guided my exploration of what power produced within and around Olivia. I did not seek patterns or continuity, rather my attention was on how the multiple effects of power swirling through and from Olivia impacted her social justice agenda. This sorting exercise provided a fresh view of the data and created a physical platform for my thinking. I added both reflective and analytical memos to the map that also served as data. Figure 10 is a segment of the visual map that shows Olivia’s quotes grouped by the person/people to whom they apply.

Figure 10: A segment of the visual map that records Olivia’s quotes as related to (from top left) administrators at site, families, students, librarian at site, grade-level colleagues, social issues, personal motivation, and superintendent.
As I recorded Olivia’s words, I read and re-read Foucault and the work of other authors who used his work as their theoretical lenses (i.e., Jackson, 2001; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; MacNaughton, 2005). I copied salient quotes from the literature – ideas, insights, questions – that not only resonated with my thinking, but pushed it further. I added these theoretical lines to the chart paper, eventually having to tape them to the borders due to lack of space. Theory and data laid next to each other on the floor in our home office. Figure 11 shows data lying next to quotes from pertinent literature. Figure 12 shows the visual map in its entirety.

Figure 11: Literature related to Olivia’s quotes about her personal motivation to teach for social justice taped to the visual map.
I considered interesting moments in the data with theory and thought through what newness or insights arose. In an effort to draft analytic questions, I studied this gigantic map and, with Foucault over my shoulder, decided what to ask of it.

**Analytical Questions**

Following the suggestion of Jackson and Mazzei (2012), I wondered, if Foucault was in fact sitting next to me as I read and re-read data and theory, what would he want to know? The point of this approach to analysis was to go beyond asking what Olivia’s experience meant; we can never know meaning or intent (Foucault, 1980). Rather, I looked for what was produced as power swirled around, through, and from Olivia. I sought manifestations of power; when power arose what happened?

My analytical questions existed in several iterations. Data production officially started in March of 2016 and, as mentioned earlier, I entered the research space thinking...
with critical sociocultural theory and literacy as a critical social practice as my lenses. On March 8, I drafted the following analytical question: “How does power, on both macro and micro levels, produce Olivia’s social justice teaching?” This question was aligned with critical sociocultural theory and also addressed my interest in power.

It is worth noting that although my theoretical lens shifted, power, in critical sociocultural theory, resonates in ways with Foucault’s conceptualization (Lewis, Encisco, and Moje, 2007). That is, both theories agree that power is not an entity forced upon people by some dominant source, rather it travels within and among social networks and is reproduced in and through individuals who operate within larger systems of power. Through the daily processes of learning, power is challenged, reproduced, and strengthened often in unrecognizable ways through discourse, relationships, activities, time, and space (Lewis et al., 2007). While critical sociocultural theory aligns with Foucault’s stance, as mentioned, I transitioned my theoretical lens in order to focus solely on Foucault’s work. Once my theoretical focus shifted to Foucault, my analytical questions progressed as follows:

- What do discourses of power (as related to the superintendent, families, students, media specialist) produce in Olivia? (Laura, analytic memo, June 29).
- How was Olivia constructed through social relations and cultural practices? (Laura, analytic memo, July 4).
- What are the functions and effects of power on Olivia? (Laura, analytic memo, July 4).
- What does the exercise of power produce in Olivia? (Laura, analytic memo, July 4).
• What do(es) the exercises of power from local administrators, colleagues, families, and students produce in Olivia? (Laura, analytic memo, July 22).

• What are the functions and effects of power on Olivia within specific networks of relations? (Laura, analytic memo, July 22).

• What do the exercises of power that flow through/from/within/around Olivia’s personal memories (along with the superintendent; building principal and assistant principal; students; families, media specialist) produce within and around Olivia in the context of her social justice teaching? (Laura, analytic memo, November 29).

Over time, this final question lingered. I do believe understanding this is the heart of my research goal. However, all of the analytical questions influenced the insights produced along the way. It was through these numerous iterations that I came to this last analytical question. The process, tracking this evolution of thought, was the point. My thinking changed as I read and reread theory and data.

This emergent process of data analysis produced new insights about Olivia’s journey to teach for social justice. A Foucauldian conceptualization of power released me from an oppressor/oppressed stance and shifted my attention toward the multiple effects of power that swirled through and from Olivia as she worked to meet her pedagogical goals.
Chapter 3: The Swirl of Power: Securing Read Aloud Books to Teach for Social Justice

The Swirl of Power

“It’s windy outside right now and it makes me think about how power flows – blowing one way and keeping things calm, but then a gust can rise up and reverse the flow” (Laura, reflective memo, April 8).

When reading my reflective memos, this analogy caught my attention. I remember sitting at the kidney-shaped table in Olivia’s classroom by myself while Olivia walked her students to their Special of the day (i.e., Art or Music). As I thought through what I’d observed that morning in her classroom along with what had already unfolded during this study, I gazed out the window and let it all mingle in my mind. The windy spring afternoon helped me connect Foucault’s thinking around power to Olivia’s pedagogical journey.

Imagine looking out the window and seeing a strong gust of wind wake up tree branches, causing them to move and sway back and forth, leaves drop off and sail into the sky, swirling and swirling in different directions until they gently drift to the ground, perhaps far from where they started. Gusts of wind come and go, at times the wind is strong and the tree branches are forcefully stretched from their resting places, at others, a quiet breeze barely rattles the leaves. The strength and impact of the wind changes on its own as it moves along. Like the wind, power swirled around, through, and from Olivia in various directions at varying strengths throughout her journey to teach for social justice.

Drawing on Foucault, I understand power to be a force produced by, within, through, or from sets of relations. As Olivia’s pedagogical journey unfolds in the coming
pages, I take a close look at the swirl of power within and around her and the multiple effects this power had. Like watching the wind as it aggressively shakes leaves from trees one moment and gently sways a branch the next, I follow paths of power that impacted Olivia’s social justice teaching.

**A Note about Word Choice**

As a writer, I am challenged to choose words carefully that represent the swirl of power. Foucault (1980) writes that power “circulates,” is “never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth” (p. 98). This means that power is never possessed. For example, writing about “Olivia’s power” would imply ownership, contradicting Foucault’s conceptualization. For continuity, I describe power throughout this dissertation as flowing from, around, within, or through bodies, as opposed to assigning possession.

**Analytical Question**

Jackson and Mazzei (2012) used a Foucauldian lens to study the swirl of power around two first generation women in the academy. They wrote about tracking the moments when power was “on the move” among the women and the people who impacted their experiences as academics (p. 56). As the researchers followed the movement of power, they investigated what enabled it, when their research participants worked with or against it, and how it operated “on, through, and from them” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 56). In the same way, I studied the swirl of power around Olivia and describe the times when she became a “vehicle of power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). As Foucault posits, power is not deployed to oppress or empower with finality, rather it continues to swirl and produce effects.
In order to gain insight into Olivia’s pedagogical journey, the following analytical question guided my thinking: What do the exercises of power that flow from/within/around/through ____________ (i.e., personal memories, the superintendent) produce within and around Olivia in the context of her social justice teaching?

**Chapter Organization**

This chapter focuses on how Olivia negotiated the circumstances around her to secure the key resources needed to enact her social justice agenda: read aloud books about equity. These books were the core of her social justice teaching. To begin, I describe one of her childhood memories, offering a glimpse into Olivia’s motivation for providing her students with culturally relevant and equity oriented books. Next, I introduce two key colleagues and detail how their relationships with Olivia helped her secure a supply of pertinent read aloud texts. In Chapter 4, I discuss what happened when Olivia read some of these books with her students.

Throughout these chapters, I weave in details about the research setting in an effort to craft the narrative of Olivia’s journey. At times, I put these details in conversation with Foucault to track the flow of power among different actors and factors (i.e., a discussion around Olivia’s encounter with the deputy superintendent). Some of this writing is not in response to the formal analytical question; it simply establishes that my process of thinking with theory saturated this research endeavor. I also include reference to pertinent literature to provide context for this work within the field of early childhood literacy. *From this point on, writing in italics signals Foucault’s theories at work with the data; this demonstrates analysis.*
It is worth noting, that although I begin analysis with a data excerpt describing Olivia’s past, I am not attempting to pinpoint the origin of the swirl of power (as related to social justice teaching goals) around her. What she shared with me through our conversations and more formal interviews was a partial representation of her life and work. I have no authority to claim I can describe a formal beginning of her social justice mission. Furthermore, Foucault (1980) advises specifically against seeking the point of origin or intent of power and instead suggests focusing on its multiple effects. I begin with Olivia’s childhood memory to introduce readers to her through a personal experience that influenced her social justice teaching.

**Olivia’s Personal Memories: “All the Literature That You Read is Mainstream White”**

A poignant step back into the past provided insight into Olivia’s early educational experiences. She remembered being a black elementary school student who, more often than not, read books with predominantly white characters. While she did not know at the time that she was disadvantaged by this lack of culturally relevant literature, years later this memory influenced her work. As an elementary school teacher striving to teach her second grade students about equity, she understood that part of the work was creating a classroom where students see themselves and their experiences reflected in their learning. When asked what makes her want to pursue a social justice agenda, she reached back to her memory of being a young black student whose racial identity was not represented in her classroom and reflected,

…you go back to, of course, race wanting to be reflected in the classroom. All the literature that you read is mainstream white; none of books reflect what you
look like (in her elementary school experience)...I don’t even think in my childhood I knew what it was it (lack of representation in curricular materials) was. I didn’t understand - I don’t look like this (interview, January 28, p. 7).

Olivia’s early education was spent reading books with characters who didn’t look like her, characters with whom, perhaps, she had a hard time connecting. As an elementary school teacher, Olivia explicitly valued her students’ identities. Admitting that race was a sensitive and complicated topic, Olivia noticed the discomfort her students felt when talking about it.

“Saying ‘Black’ is Bad: Second Graders Think about Race

To address this discomfort around race, Olivia created space for students to share their thinking, even when it was awkward. She explained,

So somebody (a student) said, “Saying ‘black’ is bad.” So I said, “Why is (identifying someone as) ‘black’ or ‘white’ a bad thing?” And one (student) said, “You can identify yourself. You can use it (race) to identify yourself… (but) some people are being rude or racist. You are just being rude or racist if you call someone black.”…He’s (the student) very… I guess he’s a really deep kind of critical thinker… I could see him thinking - “I know it’s not bad that you’re white or black, but if you call someone black…” I asked him for an example. He said, “On the playground someone called someone a ‘brownie’ and they were just referring to the skin color” (conversation, March 17, p. 1).

Through classroom conversations, Olivia heard that some of her seven and eight-year-old students believed that calling a black person “black” was offensive. She also learned that racial slurs (“brownie”) were being used on the playground. These incidents of her
students’ racial awareness underscored the importance of Olivia’s social justice pedagogy. She wanted to create the space for her students to further explore their identities.

Another example of second graders’ racial awareness manifested during the year Olivia and I taught together. She invited two of her students to a high school football game where they would meet her husband, the principal of one of the schools who was playing. This was a way for her to connect with students outside of the classroom and demonstrated her commitment to them. When the two boys (both black) met Olivia’s husband, they had an interesting race-related reaction.

**Olivia:** …my first year at Elm Elementary, I had taken Devonte and Kareem (two students) to the football game and to meet Elijah (her husband) and he came and shook their hand and they just kind of looked at him, like, “Who is the man?” I was like “This is my husband.” They go, “He’s a principal?” I was like, “Yeah. Why are you surprised?” (They responded) “We thought he was white.”

(interview, June 22, pp. 11-12).

These examples provide evidence that race mattered to Olivia’s students. Her second graders were not living in a post-racial, colorblind world. They not only saw race, they had clear opinions about naming it, about how it determined employment, and some were savvy enough to use it as a way to marginalize others. Olivia planned learning engagements (i.e., read alouds to be discussed later) specifically designed to invite conversation about race.
Exploring Current Events

While read alouds about sociopolitical issues like race were the crux of Olivia’s social justice pedagogy, she also turned to current events for opportunities to broaden her students’ understandings of and experience with social issues. Olivia worried that her students didn’t have the opportunity to engage in dialogue around current social issues. She explained,

…and you have the issues (of equity) outside of the classroom that are never addressed in the classroom and I think the classroom is the most important place to talk about these things (i.e., race), because you go home and families have opinions, (students) don’t get to discuss it. There is no dialogue. No dissecting of what’s happening. It’s just what you see in the news. What do you do with that information? I imagine for some kids it so frustrating to want to talk about these things and not have a space to learn about them (interview, January 28, p. 7).

Olivia was purposeful in her commitment to create a different elementary school experience for her students than the one she had. She stayed tuned in to national and local current events and to classroom dynamics in an effort to include her students’ identities and questions in the curriculum. She wanted to create the space for her students to safely discuss issues that mattered to them.

A childhood memory circulated around and through Olivia, prompting her to create a different reality not just for her young students of color, but for all students whose identities rest on the margins. In her childhood, power swirled from Olivia’s teachers toward Olivia with repressive effects – Olivia’s racial identity was not reflected in classroom materials. This produced a sense of cognitive dissonance within Olivia that
she did not make sense of until years later. Foucault (1980) writes that power extends “into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives... within the social body rather than from above it” (p. 39). Olivia’s childhood memories ignited something within her. When she considered her past experiences and her present classroom of diverse students, a desire to create an academic environment in which all students saw themselves reflected in the curriculum was produced. This desire infiltrated her actions and attitude toward teaching and came from within, rather than being imposed upon her from someone with higher status.

Olivia became a vehicle of power and made decisions based upon her motivation to provide a more equitable academic experience for her students than she had in elementary school. This desire produced in Olivia was not the only effect of this swirl of power, however. Foucault (1980) urges us to study the multiple effects of power, to look further than a simplistic ending of empowerment or repression when power is exercised. He explains that a possible effect of power is resistance.

Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them (Foucault, 1977, p. 26).

Olivia resisted the potentially oppressive grip of her childhood memory. Rather than complaining about or simply repressing the image of herself as a black student reading about white characters, Olivia acted in ways that produced new realities for her students. Her second graders learned that their racial identities were sources of pride and that
claiming to be colorblind ignores essential parts of people’s identities. In Olivia’s classroom, race was valued and important (examples to be discussed later in this chapter) and because of that, it was a legitimate component of the curriculum. To return to the analytical question, the exercises of power that flowed from Olivia’s personal memories produced a desire within Olivia to create a more equitable classroom experience for her students.

Olivia’s pedagogical moves to explore race with her students demonstrated how power is kept in motion and how it is productive (Foucault, 1980). This productive power continued to swirl and created new links through new sets of relations (i.e., from Olivia toward her students). In doing so, power spread further into social networks (Foucault, 1978).

From here, I follow the exercises of power around and within Olivia - how she struggled with and incited power, and in doing so produced new ways to meet her social justice goals (i.e., securing a supply of read aloud books). The swirl of power continued as Olivia enacted decisions related to curricular resources that kept “power on the move” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). In her quest for books that reflected her students, Olivia first searched through her school’s inventory and then reached out to colleagues.

**(Lack of) School Resources**

One day after school, Olivia and I walked to the Book Room, an in-house resource room for teachers to check out text sets for guided reading (small group) lessons. The district used the *Good Habits Great Readers* (see Pearonschool.com) curriculum that provided teachers with multiple copies of books for guided reading lessons, however, many of those texts represented non-dominant groups in incomplete
and unfair ways (Tosolt & Love, 2011). In the Book Room, we searched for books with non-white main characters or books about social issues (i.e., race and poverty) and found very few options. Though this was not a surprise, it became a source of frustration for both of us. Olivia explained,

We are supposed to use these books (in the Book Room), but we can use (others, too). There are not many titles (that reflect the student population) here (in the Book Room). I mean I’ve seen literally like one title. The rest are kind of cheesy (conversation, March 4, p. 7).

Later that day, I recorded my thoughts in my reflective notebook.

The question remains: In a Title One building with many African American families, where are the culturally relevant (curricular materials that represent the student population) resources? We walked to the Book Room and could not find any for guided reading. She (Olivia) is going to make copies of books (she has) and use those. According to Olivia, the school library does not have a huge/high quality selection. What is interesting is how Olivia works around this (Laura, reflective memo, March 4).

Not to be thwarted by the lack of resources the school provided, Olivia made a plan to photocopy enough copies of the texts she wanted to read with her students in order to bring social justice oriented topics to her small group reading instruction.

While the decision of the district to adopt a literacy curriculum that does not represent its students and Olivia’s school’s minimal supply of books with non-white characters that address issues of equity could certainly be understood as flows of power with repressive effects, Olivia did not let these actions determine the final outcome of her
curricular options. Like Foucault who argues that power is always in motion, Olivia kept power moving by devising ways to interrupt these circumstances.

Curricular materials with non-controversial plot lines and homogenous characters are part of the dominant discourse around early childhood education. Young children are understood to be innocent beings with no need to explore sociopolitical topics or to think critically, as detailed below. This connects to why Olivia and I thought our social justice oriented research project would face opposition. Schools were not supplying teachers (and students) with materials that challenge the status quo or interrupt dominant ways of thinking, as evidenced by the lack of book selection at Olivia’s school. MacNaughton (2000) worked with preschool teachers to study how gender was understood in an early childhood setting. She asked one of the teachers, Edna, about the students’ thinking around their behavior that conformed to gendered norms.

**MacNaughton:** Have you asked them (girls) why (they’re not playing in the block area)?

**Edna:** (Frowning and shifting in her seat): I don’t quite feel confident about asking children, ‘why?’ I don’t think ‘why?’ is very relevant to little children, or to many people for that matter” (pp. 91-92).

This exchange demonstrates the discourse around early childhood education that values the innocence of children, while devaluing their wisdom, experience, and ability to think abstractly. The danger here, Foucault (1980) warns us, is that when truths become normalized, the world begins to revolve around them. Policies and institutions, including schools, organize themselves around the ideas strengthened by the weight of “truth.”
This leads to the classification of what is normal and what is not. Such boundaries creep into all areas of a school, including lesson planning and teaching style.

The post-structural stance that there are multiple truths, as opposed to one singular truth, implies that what is universally accepted as fact can be challenged. Olivia chose, based on her personal experiences and her stance toward early childhood education, to interrupt what was considered to be the “normal” curriculum for second graders. By deliberately selecting books about equity to read aloud to her students and creating learning opportunities around identity and race, she disrupted the normalized approach to teaching young children.

Olivia kept power flowing through her interactions with colleagues. She shared her concerns about the lack of curricular resources with the deputy superintendent, her school’s media specialist, and the superintendent.

**Spreading the Word**

While at the district’s central office one day, Olivia mentioned the glaring lack of books that represent her students to Rhonda, the deputy superintendent and later described the encounter to me:

But I was talking to Rhonda, “I’ve been at Elm (another Title One school in the district), I’m at Beech… we’re Title (One) buildings. There is nothing culturally relevant to our kids at all.” (regarding curricular materials that represent the student body)… She says she knows; they just haven’t had anyone push it. I said, “Can I push it? I’m pushing!” (conversation, March 4, p. 7).

In this instance, power swirled from Olivia toward a district level administrator. By sharing her stance on the lack of resources and using the strong words, “I’m pushing...
it,” Olivia signaled to Rhonda that she had a social justice agenda she was actively pursuing. What this exchange produced in Rhonda is beyond the scope of my research. I designed my dissertation around Olivia and the actors and factors that impacted her social justice teaching; I was not studying how Olivia may have impacted others’ thinking or actions in relation to her work. However, it may be assumed that if nothing else, Olivia’s comment made Rhonda pause and think for a moment about the resources the district provides to students.

*Power flowed through and from decision-makers - the people who adopted the literacy curricula for the district, the people who stocked the school library and Book Room shelves, and the deputy superintendent who chose to remain silent in the face of this literary cultural deficit. Power also flowed through and from Olivia. As she remembered her experiences as a black elementary school student reading about white characters and valued her students’ diverse perspectives, she knew they deserved better. She kept the swirl of power in motion as she worked to secure the resources necessary to meet her social justice goals.*

**An Unexpected Ally: The Media Specialist**

Looking for insight into her school’s inventory of books, Olivia talked with her school’s media specialist, Beth, about the lack of culturally responsive books available to their students. Unbeknownst to Olivia, Beth was supportive of teaching for social justice and immediately offered to order books if Olivia sent her a list of titles. It just so happened that Beth had several thousands of dollars available to purchase books and if she received a list the next day, she would see what she could do.
Olivia and I quickly created a collection based on books we knew that addressed issues of equity and Olivia emailed Beth the titles later that day. Olivia and I completed this task with little confidence that quick action would be taken. It felt like wishful thinking to provide a list of books and then to receive them; it just seemed too easy. Maybe some would be ordered, maybe not. Regardless, we agreed, Beth would read the titles of several books around equity and perhaps want to continue the conversation with Olivia about social justice work.

*Foucault (1980) is interested in the productive effects of power as it swirls through the ordinary actions of everyday life. This was a simple exchange between colleagues that demonstrated the flow of power from Olivia toward Beth. Olivia explained to Beth that there was a lack of culturally relevant texts found in the Book Room and the school library. Beth had the freedom to respond and she chose to use her discretionary funds to fully support Olivia’s social justice initiative. This was a productive effect of power. Power, as the force that flowed through a set of relations (Olivia and Beth), produced an outcome (ordering specific books) that supported Olivia’s social justice goals.*

Beth searched for the each title Olivia sent and noted if the school already had it (either in the Media Center or Book Room), if she ordered it for either location, or if it was only available in Spanish (meaning she would not be ordering it). Titles with no response next to them meant the school did not own them and her source for purchasing books did not have them. Table 3 displays the book requests (by subject) and Beth’s responses.
Table 3: Requested Books and Beth’s Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Homelessness/Social Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book Requested</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Shoebox Sam</em> (Barrett &amp; Morrison, 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Lunch Thief</em> (Bromley &amp; Casilla, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>December</em> (Bunting &amp; Diaz, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Shelter in Our Car</em> (Gunning &amp; Pedlar, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I Can Hear the Sun</em> (Polacco, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Can Man</em> (Williams &amp; Orback, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Lady in a Box</em> (McGovern &amp; Backer, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fly Away Home</em> (Bunting &amp; Himler, 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Those Shoes</em> (Boelts &amp; Jones, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Table Where Rich People Sit</em> (Baylor &amp; Parnall, 1998)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Race/Identity/Power Related</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Black, White, Just Right</em> (Davol &amp; Trivas, 1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Coolies</em> (Yin, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Whitewash</em> (Shange &amp; Sporn, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiromi’s Hands (Barasch, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Name is Bilal (Mobin-Uddin &amp; Kiwak, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Name Jar (Choi, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasreen’s Secret School (Winter, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Other Side (Woodson &amp; Lewis, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing War (Beckwith &amp; Lyon, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rene Has Two Last Names/Rene Tiene dos Appelidos (Lainez &amp; Ramirez, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si, Se Puede! Yes, We Can: Janitor Strike in L.A. (Cohn &amp; Delgado, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So Far From the Sea (Bunting &amp; Soentpriet, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That’s Not Fair! / ¡No Es Justo!: Emma Tenayuca's Struggle for Justice/La lucha de Emma Tenayuca por la justicia (Tafolla, Teneyuca, &amp; Ybanez, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World’s Fastest Woman (Krull &amp; Diaz, 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace for President (DiPucchio &amp; Pham, 2008)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the list of social justice themed books that Olivia and I created, Beth ordered seven individual copies for the Media Center and eight text sets for the Book Room. This meant teachers would have books about equity to use during guided reading (small group) instruction. Furthermore, students would have more opportunities to see themselves reflected in the literature they read at school. Olivia also learned that five of the titles we requested were already owned by her school. This was encouraging.

In this instance, Olivia created an opportunity for someone who may not have taken the initiative to pursue a social justice agenda. By engaging in conversation about the inventory of books available to students, Olivia found a quiet ally interested in bringing social issues into the school. Beth’s simple answer of, “Yes, I will order some books,” furthered Olivia’s mission to create an atmosphere of social justice. Learning that a colleague was also interested in social justice pedagogy made Olivia want to continue to reach out to others. Beth’s response was encouraging; she was willing to do what she could from her position as media specialist to provide social justice oriented books for students. What other staff members might be willing to collaborate with Olivia
to create equity-oriented learning experiences for students? Who else might have resources or teaching ideas to share? There was the potential for social justice work to slowly expand throughout the school building if people started talking to each other about it.

When reflecting upon how to do this, Olivia admitted her uncertainty,

She’s (Beth) very supportive… but what I would like to do is … and I don’t even know how to approach my staff and administrators, but I want to have equity conversations. I don’t even know what to call it. But I know just sitting in the lounge talking to certain people that you can just see a fire sparking, and people want to talk about this stuff. They just don’t know how. They don’t know what is appropriate, what’s inappropriate, what if I offend someone, what you can get in trouble for doing and saying, but our media specialist, she is very passionate. I can tell she wants to address these things. She doesn’t know how, she doesn’t know the right outlet, and I think purchasing these books is a start (interview, March 31, p. 4).

What is important about this data excerpt is not sorting through Olivia’s intention for talking with Beth. Rather, what is interesting is where power “installs itself and produces its real effects” (Foucault, 1980, p. 97). In this case, the effects produced were material (ordered books) and emotional (Olivia’s motivation to network). Through the swirl of power, the books (when used with students), and Olivia’s motivation to reach out to colleagues will continue to produce effects.

To return to the analytical question, Beth’s exercise of power (ordering books) produced a desire within Olivia to get other colleagues involved in exploring topics of
equity. Knowing she had Beth’s support and more books would soon be on their way was a motivating force that produced in Olivia a stronger commitment to go forward with her social justice agenda. With this support, social justice texts would be available to the whole school, thus increasing access to the work of questioning, critiquing, and considering new perspectives. Olivia’s main question was how to invite other staff members into conversation about social justice teaching.

Olivia acknowledged the complexities of social justice work when she said she didn’t even know how to start conversations about it with her co-workers. Olivia saw a “fire sparking” among her peers, meaning she sensed there was a wider interest in social justice, but it was a complex subject area to engage. Sociopolitical issues are sensitive and complicated.

This collaboration between Olivia and Beth also revealed the potential of working with what was already in place. In other words, by simply connecting with a colleague, a barrier to Olivia’s social justice teaching was removed (securing a supply of read aloud books). This was evidence there was no need for Olivia to remain complacent. Action, though likely not always immediate, was possible when she reached out to others. Her desire to work with colleagues and spread the word about social justice texts was strengthened. Connecting with the district superintendent was another move with a significant impact on her social justice agenda.

**Friends in High Places: Another Unexpected Source of Read Aloud Books**

Olivia’s influence within her school district extended beyond the walls of her second grade classroom. As a third year teacher, her participation on select committees, including the Equity Team and the Minority Recruitment Committee provided
opportunities for her to present at professional development meetings within the district. Through her own initiative and drive, Olivia knew several administrators at the district level, including the superintendent, Dr. Baylor. In a large public school district, it is perhaps rare for teachers to have a personal relationship with the superintendent. Olivia used her relationship with him to her advantage.

Because of their familiarity, she was comfortable emailing Dr. Baylor to tell him she was exploring issues of homelessness (her social justice read aloud focus in the fall) with her students. He responded by sending her a stack of picture books from his personal collection that addressed homelessness and poverty. There was no significant conversation about how she might use them or what her pedagogical plans were, but she expressed a need and he offered his resources. That simple gesture led to more book sharing throughout the year.

In the spring, when Olivia chose to explore topics of identity, specifically race, with her second graders, she once again reached out to Dr. Baylor. Within days, he sent another stack of pertinent picture books her way including Jalapeno Bagels (Wing, 1996), Separate is Never Equal (Tonatiuh, 2014), Happy to be Nappy (hooks, 1999), and Roberto Clemente: Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates (Winter, 2005). Again, there was no conversation between Olivia and Dr. Baylor about how these books would be used, but the fact that he lent them to her implied he expected them to be shared with students. Throughout the spring, Olivia read each title mentioned above to her students. These books sparked conversation about equality, segregation, fairness, and pride in oneself. Dr. Baylor never checked in with Olivia to see if and how she used his books. Later in the year, after several of his books had been read and discussed, Olivia shared evidence
of the impact of the texts on her students’ thinking by emailing him photographs of the class audit trail.

**The audit trail.** After reading and discussing books about equity with her students, Olivia documented their thinking on the audit trail (Vasquez, 2004). The audit trail was a visual record of student learning and thinking displayed along classroom walls. Olivia and I worked together to create it. Olivia photocopied the covers of the books she read to her class and put them on the wall. I video recorded and transcribed the read alouds and then selected student quotes that revealed their questions, connections, and reactions to the issues raised in each book. I wrote the quotes and Olivia added them to the wall, with arrows coming from the book cover that initiated each comment.

The audit trail physically grew each week as we added new books and student reactions to the wall. Its influence on students strengthened, as well. Students felt proud when they saw their names on the wall next to a sentence or question they offered in conversation.

**Laura:** What did they (the students) think about the audit trail?

**Olivia:** They loved it. It gave them a good reference. They liked seeing their names up there. And they would ask, “When are we going to do social justice again? I have something to say.” I think some of them just wanted their names up there, but I think it's good that we have it and that way if they have special things they want to say, things they want to add to the conversation, they know that they might get their quote put up on the wall. So that’s special to them (conversation, March 24, p. 2).
Olivia took pictures of the audit trail and emailed them to Dr. Baylor to share the insightful responses her students had to his books. Surprisingly, she did not hear back. However, when she went to his office for a meeting, she saw some familiar images on display.

Olivia was at a meeting in Dr. Baylor’s office about minority recruitment and saw a picture of her class’s audit trail on his bulletin board, along with other social justice stuff happening in district classrooms. He thought it (the audit trail) was amazing. He said he was always scared to read *Happy to be Nappy* as a teacher. Despite his enthusiasm, he never emailed Olivia a response after receiving the pictures (of the audit trail that she emailed him) (Laura, reflective memo, May 6).

Even though he did not respond to her initial email with the audit trail pictures, Dr. Baylor clearly valued the social justice work Olivia facilitated in her classroom. He, the top administrator in the district, chose to display photos of her students’ thinking in his office, to be shared with anyone who entered. Still, however, Olivia and Dr. Baylor neglected to discuss her work beyond a superficial level.

**Laura:** Did you ever talk to him (Dr. Baylor) about the (social justice) work in depth?

**Olivia:** No. Didn’t have the opportunity. I want to and I feel just like he was genuine (in his interest, but) he never emailed me and said, “I have your picture on the bulletin board.” I just happened to be in his office and there it was.

**Laura:** So that was kind of a confidence boost?
**Olivia:** Yeah. And then just knowing there are other teachers in different buildings that are doing the same thing (teaching for social justice) (interview, June 22, p. 6).

While Dr. Baylor did not seek Olivia’s permission to publicly display her students’ work, and if she hadn’t had a meeting in his office, she may never have known it was on display, this was a substantial endorsement of her social justice agenda. His bulletin board also had examples of social justice oriented work from other classrooms in the district, which softened the isolation Olivia felt at times.

*When using Foucault’s conceptualization of power, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) remind us that Foucault studies the “deployment of power, a deployment that makes visible how the subject is constructed through social relations and cultural practices” (p. 54). The deployment of power that flowed from Dr. Baylor toward Olivia demonstrated how Olivia was constructed through her relationship with him. While both explicit and hidden, Dr. Baylor’s support of Olivia’s social justice pedagogical goals produced within her a level of confidence in her work.* Olivia admitted,

I think the strongest or most powerful impact (on my social justice work this year) was book sharing with Dr. Baylor…So, I feel like just being able to shoot him a topic and then he send me back multiple books on whatever it was I was teaching for the moment…that was very powerful because it let me know that I was supported and then when I went into his office and saw the picture on his bulletin board, it was just like, “We’re taking this seriously” (interview, June 22, p. 6).

*When Olivia described her book sharing relationship with Dr. Baylor as “powerful,” she acknowledged how power flowed. With Dr. Baylor’s support of her work,* she felt
validated and in some ways protected from potential challenges to her social justice agenda. Knowing she was supported by the main boss produced in her a sense that her work was legitimized, or taken “seriously.”

In the hierarchy of a public school district, the superintendent sits at the top. Dr. Baylor was a person with higher professional status than Olivia, and his exercises of power extended a safety net around her. Power can be characterized as a “bad” thing or a burden, but Foucault (1980) reminds us of its productive effects. In this case, the power of the superintendent flowed through and within Olivia, impacting her pedagogical decision-making (which books to read and when), creating opportunities for equity-oriented classroom discussions, and instilled a sense of confidence in her, a feeling that her work was valued. Knowing that the most “powerful” person in the district took her social justice teaching seriously enabled Olivia to worry less about any punitive consequences of her pedagogical decisions and to focus on her work with students. Dr. Baylor’s support also enabled her to move forward with her lessons. Still waiting for the books Beth ordered to arrive, Dr. Baylor provided texts immediately. The exercises of power that swirled from Dr. Baylor toward Olivia were subtle (quietly sending books, displaying her students’ work in his office), but they evolved and circulated (Foucault, 1980) around and within Olivia.

We will never know the intent behind Dr. Baylor’s public display of Olivia’s work for two reasons. First, it was beyond the scope and purpose of this dissertation to interview anyone other than Olivia, and second, Foucault (1980) argues it is the effects of power that are worth pursuing, as understanding someone else’s intent is an unattainable goal. The focus of this dissertation was to analyze the swirl of power around
Olivia in the context of her social justice teaching, to attempt to understand how the effects of power impacted her pedagogy. While Olivia stated that Dr. Baylor’s (quiet) support of her teaching was empowering, it is worth considering more than one reading of this situation.

Perhaps in posting the photographs of Olivia’s classroom audit trail, power swirled through Dr. Baylor in a self-serving way. If anyone visited his office and asked about the district’s focus on poverty, he could point to the quotes from Olivia’s students and explain that teachers within the district were addressing issues of equity through read alouds. He could even add the detail that his own personal books were a part of the impetus for the class’s discussion. Using Olivia’s and her students’ work as evidence of social justice teaching could reflect well on Dr. Baylor, with relatively little effort on his part. However, we don’t know his intentions and I understand that the situation could be read in multiple ways.

In this chapter, you learned about how power swirled within, through, and from Olivia as she traveled on her journey to teach for social justice, specifically in her attempts to accumulate the read aloud books she needed for instruction. While there were repressive effects of power (i.e., childhood educational experience), Olivia kept power in motion as she sought out colleagues to help her meet her pedagogical goals. The next chapter continues to track the swirl of power around and within Olivia as she put these read aloud books to use in her classroom.
Chapter 4: Using the Read Aloud Books

In this chapter, I describe student reactions to several social justice read aloud experiences Olivia facilitated. Her students’ engagement was a key motivator for Olivia that propelled her to pursue her social justice agenda. I also discuss a significant challenge Olivia faced when a student’s family objected to her pedagogical approach.

Social Justice Read Aloud Time

While Beth, the media specialist, ordered several books Olivia requested, their delivery took weeks. However, Olivia had her personal collection of books to use, along with the books Dr. Baylor shared with her. At this point, her social justice instruction through read alouds was an “add-on” to the general curriculum she used. While her goal was to one day have a “social justice atmosphere” in her classroom, she was not there yet.

Olivia planned for each Friday afternoon to be “social justice read aloud time.” During the last hour of the day, students gathered on the carpet and Olivia read a book about equity to them (specific examples to follow). Olivia planned her social justice read alouds on a week-by-week basis. She did not draft a typical “scope and sequence” that accompanies more structured curricular guides because she did not know ahead of time where social justice read alouds might lead. This was okay with her. Olivia had access to a rich collection of literature and she used it to her advantage.

During my time in her classroom, Olivia focused on race and ethnicity and selected books that addressed segregation and pride in oneself. There were some Friday afternoons when she and I sorted through stacks of books she had gathered and talked about which one to read next. There were other weeks when I arrived without knowing what she’d be reading and settled in to listen with the students. Olivia looked for
compelling characters and engaging plots that she thought would hold her students’ attention and lead to interesting discussion. Table 4 names the books about race and ethnicity she read and documents some of the questions she frequently asked her students during social justice read aloud time.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date read aloud</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Common Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End of February (pre-IRB)</td>
<td><em>Let’s talk about race</em> (Lester &amp; Barbour, 2008)</td>
<td>• What does that mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 17</td>
<td><em>Freedom on the menu</em> (Weatherford &amp; Lagarrigue, 2005)</td>
<td>• What else?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 18</td>
<td><em>Separate is never equal</em> (Tonatiuh, 2014)</td>
<td>• What are your thoughts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 24</td>
<td><em>Jalapeno bagels</em> (Wing &amp; Casilla, 1996)</td>
<td>• Does it have to be that way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 8</td>
<td><em>Happy to be nappy</em> (hooks, 1999)</td>
<td>• What do you notice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 15</td>
<td><em>Roberto Clemente: Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates</em> (Winter &amp; Colon, 2005)</td>
<td>• Why is it like this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 29 and May 6</td>
<td><em>Goin’ someplace special</em> (McKissack &amp; Pinkney, 2001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 20</td>
<td><em>As fast as words could fly</em> (Tuck &amp; Velasquez, 2013)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While Olivia often collaborated with her grade-level colleagues on lesson planning, they chose not to implement a social justice read aloud time in their classrooms.
and planned their own learning engagements for the final hour of the week. Creating space for young children to talk about issues of equity (i.e., race relations) is controversial, but with the approval of her administrators and the lack of interest from her teammates, Olivia was essentially left alone to teach in the way she thought was best.

With the permission of the administrators to proceed with this research project, Olivia and I felt a certain level of freedom. Olivia reflected, “I don’t feel like they (the principal and assistant principal) have an opinion whatsoever (about her social justice teaching), which I guess is good” (interview, March 31, p. 4). The “good” part was that this lack of opinion provided Olivia a degree of freedom. She did not need to worry that at any given moment an administrator would walk into her room and express disapproval about a read aloud regarding race or a learning engagement around identity. Similarly, I was not concerned that my dissertation was a point of controversy within the school. Olivia was trusted as an educator and was left alone to teach her students according to her stance toward education.

The “freedom” we feel, however, was conditional. Foucault (1980) argues that power does not come from a single source who operates from a status above everyone else, rather power travels in, through, and among people in social relations. He adds that power has multiple effects and functions, in other words, when someone acts upon another, as in an administrator consenting to a research project, this action is not a swift and final move that terminates the swirl of power. Rather, the teacher, in this case Olivia, had the freedom to respond to this exercise of power. Foucault (2000) argues, It should also be noted that power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one were completely at the other’s disposal and became his
thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn’t be any relations of power. Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides (p. 292).

When power is conceptualized as running through people as opposed to being forced upon them, a sense of freedom is acknowledged. That being said, the idea of freedom implies a lack of consequences; an ability to act without outside resistance. While Olivia experienced freedom to an extent - she did not have to gain official approval for any social justice lessons, it remained true that as an employee of a public school, there were constraints felt on what she ultimately could and could not do in her classroom.

With her conditional freedom, Olivia read a social justice themed text aloud as a springboard for discussion about social issues each Friday afternoon. She shared videos about relevant real-world stories that connected to the social topics the class explored (i.e., a story about a young black girl who was suspended from school because of how she wore her hair), focusing specifically on race during the months of March and April.

There was plenty of indecision between Olivia and me about how to proceed, what book to read next, how to respond to challenging student questions; it was by no means a linear and straightforward road of instruction. However, students enthusiastically raised their hands during social justice read aloud conversations; the topics, such as race and identity elicited comments and questions from the class each week. Olivia continued to search for new books to read, current events to share, and projects to assign. She kept the momentum going by continuously creating new learning engagements. However, this was no easy task.
Challenges of Social Justice Read Alouds

Vasquez (2004) says critical literacy is lived and as such, cannot be taught traditionally, following predictable lesson plans designed to meet specific objectives. Likewise, Olivia wanted social justice to be the “atmosphere” of her classroom, though she admitted this was an emergent process.

Because ideally, you want those (equity oriented) conversations to be just a part of your cultural atmosphere – not “we’re going to sit down and do social justice today.” I think initially when you’re introducing a topic like social justice you are going to have to take it step by step, let it gradually kind of come about on its own (interview, June 22, p. 5).

Olivia did not always know how to plan and implement social justice oriented lessons around the read alouds she chose. Teaching without a guide, without the safety of a linear lesson plan was challenging. It was impossible to predict how students would react to topics like race and identity. It was impossible to have the “right” or “best” answers on the tip of her tongue each time she was faced with a difficult question from a student. It was impossible for Olivia to know in what direction a conversation “should” go when she was willing to trust her students enough to let them ask or share or question or critique any part of the content they were exploring.

Reading practitioner-based literature about critical literacy, while inspiring, sometimes provides a victory narrative – a smooth depiction of the classroom that presents the work as seamless. For example, Souto-Manning (2009) writes about how, based on the questions and noticings of her students, her class of first graders determined that academic pull-out services were inequitable and served as a form of modern-day
segregation. Through their collective action, the next year, no students were removed from this class for supplemental instruction. What is missing from this article is the explicit description of how a teacher guides that sort of inquiry.

Souto-Manning’s (2009) article is one that initially inspired my commitment to critical literacy. I imagined scenarios like the one she described in my classroom with my own students. However, as a practicing early childhood teacher trying to create curriculum around issues of equity, challenges (i.e., the time and resources needed to plan an emergent curriculum; facilitating conversations with young children around issues of equity; responding to students’ questions and comments about sensitive issues like race) immediately surfaced and my imagined teaching experience faded into the distance.

Referencing Cowhey’s (2006) book about critical literacy in an early childhood setting, Olivia posited, “Trying to have those authentic conversations like in *Black Ants and Buddhists* (Cowhey, 2006). I just cannot … When does that happen? I think because I was looking for it, it didn’t happen for me” (interview, June 22, p. 5). After reading literature describing social justice work with young children that appeared to progress seamlessly - the teacher plans impactful lessons, the students take charge of their learning and create concrete action (i.e., holding a fundraiser) to make change - Olivia hoped for a similar outcome in her classroom, but at the same time she understood that teaching for social justice was complicated.

Bringing a critical perspective to teaching means that pedagogical decisions are made based in large part on the resources, passions, and cognitive dissonance of the students in an effort to expose inequities; to examine the relationship between language and power; to understand that texts of all kinds position readers; and to work toward
social justice (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2004). Despite the ubiquitous challenges, one of the main motivators for Olivia’s persistence was what happened when she and her students gathered on the carpet to share a reading experience.

**Students Engage with Social Justice Themed Books**

To provide evidence of the kinds of experiences Olivia and her students had during social justice read aloud time, I offer three examples. The first is Olivia’s reflection on a powerful read aloud, the second and third include students’ responses to books in their own words. This section is designed to offer context for Olivia’s social justice read aloud time, so you gain an understanding of the kind of work that happened in Olivia’s classroom on Friday afternoons. Further discussion and analysis of the effects of power swirling during these kinds of learning engagements follows.

*Lady in a Box* (McGovern, 1999): “The Conversation Just Kind of Took Hold of Itself”

Stocking shelves with books about justice and equity is an important step in teaching for social justice, however, the value of this work comes alive when those books are taken off the shelves and introduced to students. The characters become members of the classroom - the words and illustrations produce questions, illicit passionate responses, and ignite dialogue about what is right and wrong, fair and unfair. These books inspire thinking and empathy and broaden perspectives. Olivia reflected on a particularly influential social justice oriented lesson based on a conversation her students had after a read aloud,

One (lesson) that sticks out in particular: we read the book *Lady in a Box*, (McGovern, 1999) and that story was about a woman who was, of course,
homeless. She lived in a box. There were two children (in the story) who went about on their own, just kind of sneaking food from the house and blankets and whatnot and helping her. It kind of made the kids really think about what they could do personally to help (homeless) students and bring awareness. The conversation just kind of took hold of itself, and they talked about all the homeless people they see in Columbia. I think I took a moment to bring up some articles and some videos on homelessness. I just talked about how there are families like that that are right here in this school and that kind of made them emotional. They really wanted to stop it. So that one was a really powerful lesson, I think (interview, March 31, p. 2).

Olivia chose the book, *Lady in a Box* (McGovern, 1999), around a designated theme (homelessness) and when she read it aloud to her class, the story and its characters interacted with her students. As Olivia recalled, “The conversation took just kind of hold of itself…that kind of made them emotional. They really wanted to stop it (homelessness).” In facilitating a discussion around this book, Olivia felt the passion of her students. She sensed their outrage at the inequity of resources like housing and food and she listened as they questioned why life had to be like that for some families.

In an attempt to push their thinking further, perhaps toward student-led action, Olivia capitalized on the energy around this topic and talked with her students about how they could help. As mentioned in Chapter 1, when a canned food and clothing drive was suggested, she pushed further.

So I said, “We can collect canned goods, and we can collect coats and things of that nature. But what happens after they use the canned goods?” I would leave
open-ended questions. They would think and you’d see them looking…

Someone said, “We could plant a garden.” So I asked Susan (principal) if we could plant a garden and she told me no (interview, March 31, pp. 1-2).

This read aloud was impactful because it stirred a sense of justice within Olivia’s students. They felt it was unfair that some people had more than enough resources to survive, while others had next to nothing. This conversation was a step toward activism; her students were thinking about how they could step in and redesign this inequitable situation. Olivia revealed the complicated nature of advocacy when she questioned what happens when the food runs out. While clothing and food drives are certainly helpful, she encouraged her second grade students to think beyond quick fixes and toward more sustainable action.

The class did not end up organizing a food or clothing drive and once the principal denied the request to plant a garden, the idea was no longer pursued. Time moved on, curricular expectations abounded, and soon enough social justice read aloud books were about race and identity, instead of homelessness. While an imagined victory narrative would tell the story, perhaps, of how the students lobbied the principal, planted a garden, and fed the local homeless population for years to come, Olivia’s journey did not take that route. Nonetheless, when I asked her to describe a particularly “successful or powerful” social justice lesson, this example was what came to mind.

*Jalapeno Bagels* (Wing, 1996): “He Was Super Into the Book”

Another impactful moment with read aloud texts, according to Olivia, came when Diego, a Hispanic student, responded to a particular book: *Jalapeno Bagels* (Wing, 1996). This story of a family with a Jewish father and a Mexican mother, resonated with
him. Olivia described,

Diego spoke a lot, so that (the read aloud) kind of brought him out. So I think I’m going to incorporate more books with Spanish words and Hispanic heritage. He moved up to the front. He was sitting in the back and all of a sudden he was right in front of me. He’s like: ‘Ms. (Olivia) Harris, my mom is from Peru.’ He was super into the book (interview, March 24, p. 1).

Diego was a student who at times demonstrated little interest in Olivia’s instruction. During lessons in which students gathered on the rug, Diego often sat in the back, away from his classmates. Occasionally, he was sent to the “safe seat,” a desk on the outskirts of the classroom designated for students who needed to be removed from the group for various reasons (i.e., distracting or disrespectful behavior).

However, when Olivia read a book aloud with Spanish words that depicted Hispanic culture, he not only engaged in the lesson, but physically moved his body closer to his teacher. He proudly told Olivia about his mom’s heritage as he connected to the story. Jalapeno Bagels (Wing, 1996) invited Diego to participate in new ways and moved him to proudly share his personal connections to the story with his class. After this read aloud, he volunteered to teach Olivia Spanish words which created a new and meaningful way for them to interact.

This read aloud was impactful because it affirmed Diego’s heritage. He independently reached out to Olivia to teach her Spanish and perhaps felt more connected to his teacher and more engaged in his learning than he did before listening to Jalapeno Bagels (Wing, 1996). Olivia noticed this and marked Diego’s behavior as a success of social justice read aloud time.
Happy to be Nappy (hooks, 1999): “I’m Proud of My Mom”

A third example of a significant social justice read aloud is Happy to be Nappy (hooks, 1999). This story celebrates the beauty of black hair in all of its forms. Its message resonated with several students. During the conversation about this story, some students shared personal connections. One student, Dante, related the plot to his mom and her hair. He reflected, “I’m proud of my mom and she should be proud of herself.” Another student saw herself reflected in the pages of the book – just as Olivia hoped – and offered a statement of pride. Eden declared, “I also have nappy hair. I shouldn’t be ashamed how my mom does my hair even if it’s uncomfortable.”

Reading a story that reflected the identities in her classroom allowed Olivia’s students to see themselves in literature. This was significant because some came to new understandings about parts of their lives. Dante gained a sense of pride for his mom and Eden began to appreciate her hair and the effort her mom took to style it. This is evidence that social justice read aloud time influenced students’ understandings of themselves and others.

Power Flows During Social Justice Read Alouds

With a glimpse into social justice read aloud time, my focus now turns to what the exercises of power that flowed from/within/around/through students produced within and around Olivia in the context of her social justice teaching. As mentioned, part of what motivated Olivia to pursue her social justice agenda was what unfolded in the classroom during social justice read aloud time. Below, she reflected on particular students and their thoughtful participation. Sam, Andre, and Willow were students who consistently engaged in and were excited about social justice learning experiences. These students
came alive during discussions and independently applied their learning about equity to their lives outside of the classroom. There was also a student named Maya who appeared to transform her understanding of her racial identity after engaging in read alouds about race. As Olivia discussed these students’ participation, she revealed them as sources of her motivation to pursue social justice teaching.

**Sam: “He’s on Fire for Justice”**

Olivia described Sam, whose passionate responses to read aloud texts inspired her.

The good thing: if you listen to my Sam… he is so opinionated. He’s on fire for justice…The way he says it, it’s like, “Who would think that way? I don’t understand who decided black people and white people can’t work together. That’s just the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard!” And we read *Freedom on the Menu*, and at the very end they talked about how black people weren’t allowed to be at the restaurant, but they were cooks. And he said, “How stupid is that? They can’t serve black people but they can eat the food that they cook?” And I’m thinking, ‘Well, yeah! It’s just absurd!’ and he’s like, “I don’t understand it” (interview, March 31, p. 13).

Sam, a white student, experienced strong instances of cognitive dissonance when engaging with texts particularly around race relations. He simply could not make sense of the prejudice and bias that led to the harsh tactics of discrimination. He often raised his hand to vocalize his stance with emphasis and energy. Interacting with the characters and plots of these books produced in him a staunch sense of right and wrong, of what was fair or unfair.
Andre and Willow: “They Asked Questions Every Single Day”

Aside from the initial impact of hearing a story, looking at the illustrations, and engaging in discussion, the books about issues of equity Olivia read left a lasting impression on two students in particular. They connected the topics in books (i.e., homelessness, equity) to their own lives. At the end of the school year, Olivia reflected on social justice read aloud time and its impact on these two children,

Andre and Willow kind of stick out. It (the lens of equity) just didn’t stay with the social justice lesson on Friday… they asked questions every single day. If they were on the playground or they watched something on TV, they would come in and want to talk more about it with the class. I just thought bringing those topics and issues (i.e., homelessness and race) to second graders was so powerful. I think it will be something they will carry with them and continue to wonder about throughout their educational career (interview, June 22, p. 1).

Andre and Willow internalized plots, characters, and discussions around issues of social justice and developed new lenses through which to view their worlds. Issues of equity were no longer reserved for social justice lessons, these students honed radars to detect instances of privilege and oppression in their daily lives. Noticing and deliberately bringing social issues into the classroom for discussion represented the beginning of leading lives that questioned and critiqued the way things were. As Olivia said, this was more than a discrete skill, this was a stance, a framework for understanding the world; a way of being that would likely be strengthened and utilized by these students well beyond their second grade year.
When Olivia described exploring sociopolitical issues with her second graders as “powerful,” she acknowledged the swirl of power. She was admitting that creating the space for topics, such as race, to interact with her students and their worldviews had effects. For Sam, the impact came as a resolute sense of right and wrong; for Willow and Andre, it was a heightened sense of awareness. During read aloud discussions, power swirled within these students and influenced how they saw and responded to their worlds. This is what Olivia wanted – for her students to internalize a sense of justice, to begin to create a “social justice atmosphere” where they initiated discussions about equity based on their own experiences.

In the two examples described above, power relations were specific to Sam, Andre, Willow, and Olivia. Power swirled through Olivia as she chose and implemented a read aloud about race (i.e., Freedom on the Menu (Weatherford, 2005)). The characters, plot, and ensuing class discussion connected with the students’ thinking as power swirled within them and produced their equity-oriented responses. Olivia recognized this engagement in social justice read aloud time with excitement. Seeing her students take this content and make it their own produced in Olivia the motivation to keep moving forward with her work.

This description of the swirl of power among Olivia and her students demonstrates that there is no single source of power, rather power is embedded within sets of relations (Foucault, 1980). Power swirled through the practices of everyday life. While Olivia planned her pedagogical practices, it was impossible to predict their effects. She could not know ahead of a read aloud how students would react, and while she strived to nurture an equity-oriented classroom, there was no way to be assured students
would act accordingly. Because of this, it was not Olivia’s specific lessons that were important, instead how her lessons interrupted relations of power and created new social understandings was key (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

Sam’s desire to strongly question the logic of segregation revealed his developing understanding of race relations. Calling practices of segregation “stupid,” he placed judgement upon the sanctioned oppression of black people. His thinking was equity-oriented as he tried to make sense of how races could be separated at restaurants. His expression of cognitive dissonance was not lost on Olivia. She referred to Sam as “on fire for justice,” and admitted she agreed with his thinking. Similarly, Olivia’s observation that Andre and Willow questioned social realities every day was evidence that their social understandings were also evolving. Both at home and at school, Andre and Willow noticed instances of inequity and they talked about them. Sam, Andre, and Willow were in the midst of creating the “social justice atmosphere” Olivia sought. Watching them revise and develop their understandings of their worlds with a lens toward equity produced in Olivia an excitement for social justice read aloud time and strengthened her commitment to keep it going. She reflected,

I think they (social justice read alouds) are going really well. As far as just our regular conversations, I think they’re (her students) starting to understand that there’s a culture of justice, and they may not know how to express it well, but, if things are unfair or things are wrong, they can kind of point it out. I think the conversations we have are helping… to give them a deeper understanding of the books that we read. I’m enjoying it. I enjoy the things they have to say

(interview, April 21, p. 1).
As Olivia saw glimpses of a “social justice atmosphere” coming to life, she admitted she was having fun. She liked listening to her students’ insights and questions and she enjoyed watching that “culture of justice” emerge. This sense of enjoyment accompanies meaningful work. Vasquez (2015) writes,

> Often, issues of social justice and equity seem to be looked upon as heavy-handed issues. The discussions I have had with my students and the children who have participated in my research, the actions we took, and the work we accomplished, although often serious, were very pleasurable. We enjoyed our work because the topics that we dealt with were socially significant to us (p. 46).

This approach to teaching cannot pre-packaged and sold to schools complete with teacher scripts, scope and sequence, and expected outcomes. Olivia’s pedagogical practices work against neat, linear lesson plans and products, and instead capitalize on the emergent thoughts, questions, and passions of her students. Olivia’s emergent process, in particular, also speaks back to the victory narratives often discussed in critical literacy literature. Without knowing the details of how a critical literacy project came to be (i.e., planning, resource gathering, collegial or family support and/or opposition, teacher indecision) critical literacy can seem like a straightforward and somewhat effortless pedagogical framework. Olivia’s experience teaches us it is much more than that.

As she continued on her pedagogical journey, there was one child in her class, for whom social justice read aloud time was especially significant.

**Maya: “…It Helps Kids Identify Who They Are”**

While Sam, Andre, and Willow expanded their understandings of the world, for one student in particular, the read alouds and discussions around identity, specifically
race, had a momentous personal impact. Maya was a biracial child. Her biological father was black and her mother was white. At the time of this study, Maya had never met her biological father, however, and only knew her white step-father as her dad. She had white siblings and her family never explicitly discussed or identified her racial background with her. As a result, Maya was confused about her appearance. Before attending this school, she was in a more rural part of the state and as the only person of color in her class, was subjected to ridicule.

Moving to a new school and into Olivia’s classroom with both white and black students was an initial step for Maya coming to understand her racial identity. Olivia’s curricular decisions to include read alouds about race and subsequent class discussions enabled Maya to begin to understand her racial identity. *Happy to be Nappy* (hooks, 1999) was particularly influential, as a classmate referred back to this read aloud to help build Maya’s confidence about her appearance. At the end of the school year, Olivia reflected on teaching for social justice and its impact on Maya,

**Laura:** What do you think they (the students) are leaving with after this year where you did all these kinds of (social justice) lessons?

**Olivia:** I think the more impactful ones … (were) conversations about poverty and race. And I think they were able to look at each other differently. The incident that happened with Maya and just having her coming to her own consciousness about who she is and what she looks like and the students helping her identify with, “Your hair is this type of way so it’s a strong possibility that you’re black or biracial.” They did it so respectfully.
Laura: You had that conversation?

Olivia: Yeah. And then I think Jordan, maybe it was Jordan that said, “You can be proud of your hair just like in our story (Happy to be Nappy).” And so they’re kids, they’ll talk about each other, but they know now that certain things are not OK and how to advocate for one another, and so hopefully they don’t forget those things.

Laura: So did they help Maya identify with her race?

Olivia: I think so. At the end of the school year I think she still had her issues. But I feel like she was a totally different kid from the beginning of the year, just not knowing who she was, not knowing she was Biracial. I think it even helped her mom. She was able to go home and have a conversation with her mom about it. Her mom felt it was powerful. She felt pretty good at the end of the school year… I think that just goes to show you how important those conversations (about identity) are because it helps kids identify who they are (interview, June 22, pp. 1-2).

For Maya, reading books aloud about race and identity (i.e., Happy to be Nappy) provided an entry point to further explore her own. Because Olivia cultivated an environment where it was okay to talk about such things openly and honestly, Maya’s classmates were able to help her think through the questions she has about her hair and her skin color. As Olivia mentioned, this not only positively impacted Maya, but also Maya’s family who admittedly struggled with how to address Maya’s racial identity with her.
A Foucauldian conceptualization of power is helpful here, in that it maps the flow of power (through sets of relations, not resting with the hierarchy) and it encourages consideration of the positive effects of power (as opposed to how power represses).

Power was exercised through Olivia’s implementation of social justice read aloud time. Olivia created the space to discuss race and identity with her students. Her students responded to this in their own ways, keeping power in motion. As Maya began to internalize ideas about race from books Olivia read, questions about her own identity were produced. By admitting she had these questions, the effects of power swirled through her classmates and through Olivia who offered to help her better understand her identity. Eventually, Maya seemed to begin to build new knowledge about who she is.

While power swirled through Olivia’s teaching, within Maya, and through her classmates who offered their support; it also flowed toward Maya’s mom. Maya’s mom admitted to Olivia that she was unsure of how to address race with Maya, but because read aloud books in her classroom provided the entry point to discussion, Maya and her mom were able to talk about her racial identity for the first time. According to Olivia, Maya’s mom thought being able to start this conversation with Maya was “powerful.” This demonstrates that Olivia’s social justice teaching had a positive impact on a family. Power swirled within Maya and her mom to continue to explore her racial identity, knocking down a barrier in place for years.

The story of Maya’s racial awareness demonstrates that power does not stay still. It is not the “privilege acquired or preserved, of the dominant class” (Foucault, 1977, p. 26), rather it swirled through sets of relations. Power, too, is not solely a means of repression. For Maya, an effect of power was to engage in conversations about her
racial identity with her classmates and her family. This was the beginning of the process of gaining new knowledge about herself. While complicated and certainly likely to involve much more than read aloud books and discussion, Olivia observed that Maya “felt pretty good at the end of the school year.”

For Olivia, Maya’s response to the read alouds about race, along with her classmates’ support produced a sense of validation. As mentioned, it was impossible to predict how lessons would progress, so what was most important was their effects. In this case, exploring race provided the first step on a student’s journey to understanding who she is. This was significant to Maya and to her family. This was the kind of impact social justice read alouds could have. Olivia reflected, “I think that just goes to show you how important those conversations (about identity) are because it helps kids identify who they are.” Olivia clearly thought creating space to explore identity was a worthy teaching move; Maya’s experience produced within Olivia a sense of validation for her work. Although no one else in the building was teaching like her, her principal was disinterested, and teaching for social justice was hard work, Olivia knew it was worth it because students benefitted.

While moments of enthusiasm and engagement from Olivia’s students produced in her the motivation to pursue a social justice agenda and validated her efforts, not everyone supported her work. A significant challenge arrived one spring morning in the form of a strongly-worded email.

**A Controversial Assignment**

While Olivia focused on read alouds related to race, she also provided opportunities for students to broaden their conceptualization of identity to include for
example: ethnicity, birth order, hobbies like musician or basketball player, and so forth.

In order to do so, she creates the “Identity Bag Project” to welcome her students’ multiple identities into the classroom. Figure 13 shows the assignment description students received.

![Figure 13: Identity Bag Project assignment](image)

Inside this bag, students were to place three to five artifacts that represented something about them, for example favorite toys, books, or pictures. Along with this bag, Olivia prepared an interview protocol called the “Family Member Interview Project: Discovering My Identity.” Students were instructed to interview a family member to learn more about their family history and values. The assigned questions, created by Olivia and influenced by Teaching Tolerance (www.tolerance.org) and Facing History (www.facinghistory.org), two online sources for teaching for social justice, were:

1. How did you come up with my name? Does it hold a special meaning?
2. Do you have recipes that have been passed down in our family?
3. What are our family holiday traditions?

4. What is beauty? What does it mean to be beautiful?

5. Do different people have different perspectives on race, skin color and beauty?
   Why?

6. How can it help us to see an idea from a different perspective?

7. What values or beliefs are important to you?

8. How do you define culture?

9. How do you define success?

10. How do you define family?

11. What ideas or values shape who you are today?

Olivia sent the students off to spring break with these tasks and looked forward to hearing their responses after a relaxing week.

“They Get Happy When We Talk About Their Differences”

Upon return from break, Olivia encountered the first challenge to her social justice agenda. Susan, her principal, forwarded her an email she received from Ashley’s parents. In this email, sent directly to the principal, Ashley’s mom and dad took issue with Olivia’s social justice focus, specifically around discussing race. Susan forwarded the email to Olivia without comment.

The email expressed outrage toward the family interview assignment – taking specific issue with question number five: “Do different people have different perspectives on race, skin, color and beauty? Why?” Ashley was an engaged and high-achieving white student in Olivia’s class. Her parents were appalled that their second grade daughter, who according to them got along with everyone and didn’t see difference, was
in a classroom that highlighted difference by exploring race. They questioned Olivia’s teaching decisions and where the core values of education (according to them: reading, writing, and math) were in this kind of instruction. They requested that Ashley be removed from the classroom indefinitely or at least during social justice instruction.

This was an important moment in Olivia’s work with her students – her first encounter with opposition to social justice themed instruction. Because the parents sent the email directly to Susan, Olivia was in a precarious position. Susan forwarded the email to her without comment, leaving Olivia to wonder about her principal’s stance. Would she be in trouble with Susan? Might Ashley be removed from her class? Would she be told to stop her social justice read alouds in order to maintain smooth parent relationships?

Olivia immediately responded to Ashley’s family, offered an apology for upsetting them, and requested they meet in person to talk further about these curricular concerns. Ashley’s parents replied that they could not meet and they would like their daughter to be out of the room during social justice lessons. Olivia kept Susan informed. Susan never responded directly to the family, but she made it clear to Olivia that she needed to accommodate the parents’ request. Olivia was surprised that this particular family was unwilling to collaboratively problem-solve, as they previously had a pleasant relationship. She was also frustrated by her administrators’ lack of response. Talking through this situation, Olivia articulated why she thought talking about differences, like race, with her students was important. She explained,

**Olivia:** They (the administrators) haven’t even contacted her (Ashley’s mom).

They forwarded me the email, and I sent them a copy of my response… (Ashley’s
mom) responded (to me) and said she wanted Ashley to not participate in the social justice (lessons), and if she could join another second grade classroom during that time, or she would make arrangements to just pick her up, and she would not attend school during that time.

**Laura:** And you had a good relationship with them (Ashley’s family)?

**Olivia:** Yeah. Perfect. She (Ashley’s mom) was very supportive and involved. I mean she bought books for our classroom… She mentioned how… how she’s (Ashley) happy and we shouldn’t point …

**Laura:** We shouldn’t see differences.

**Olivia:** We shouldn’t see differences. I really wanted to sit down with her and she’s making herself unavailable. But, I just wanted to tell her that they (the students) notice differences whether I say it or not.

**Laura:** Differences are important.

**Olivia:** They are important, and if we don’t acknowledge them, they do become negative. And just having those conversations…what struck me the most is that she said I needed to focus on reading, writing and math. It was like, those things can’t be effective if kids are in an atmosphere where they’re not comfortable. They notice, I mean Maya from the first day of school noticed that she at least had other black students in class with her. When she was in (a more rural part of the state) she was the only black student. Her mom said she did endure a lot of racism just because she had white siblings and she was totally different. When she came here, she immediately became comfortable and that was the first thing her mom noticed… I mean … last semester when we talked about poverty and
homelessness, there was a situation where kids were kind of making fun of
clothes and shoes and after that unit I noticed I didn’t hear any of that anymore.
So I’m like… they’ll notice things whether we acknowledge them or not, and if
we live in a bubble and choose not to say anything, it will become negative.
Laura: And you even said Diego when you read Jalapeno Bagels….scooted
right up.
Olivia: Right up to the front, I mean right at my feet. He was sitting there like,
“This is me. This is my culture.” They get happy when we talk about their
differences. I wanted her (Ashley’s mom) to sit down so we could have this
conversation, but she was just like, “I’m unavailable.”…I think…I was kind of
hurt because I expected Susan to send an email and say, “As an administrator, this
is what education is …” I just expected more than “I’ll forward this and you take
care of it.”
Laura: So she (Susan) didn’t respond to the parent?
Olivia: No response… I just told the parent we’ll accommodate her, and Ashley
won’t be in the class at that time. She (Ashley’s mom) said, “Sounds perfect.
Thanks.”

I could hear the emotion in Olivia’s voice during this conversation. This was a
significant event in her journey to teach for social justice. When confronted with
opposition to her equity-based work, she felt abandoned by her administrators. Olivia
cared deeply about her students and she took her relationships with families seriously.

This instance produced in her a state of reflection, a temporary pause, not in her
work, but in her momentum. After receiving the email, Olivia took time to process it; the
sentiment of this family was unexpected and personally hurtful. She felt like her professional credibility was being questioned by a family who had previously been supportive. She took the time to think through the situation and to consider that it was impossible to predict how people would respond to the sensitive and complicated topic of race. Personal biases, assumptions, and experiences were the guideposts of reaction. Without knowing and understanding this family’s experience with race, and without the opportunity to engage in discussion about their specific concerns, Olivia respected their stance.

This parent exchange also produced within Olivia a strong desire to keep moving forward with her social justice teaching. Her reflection reminded her of the importance of this work. If parents choose not to discuss talk race with their children, where and when would children have the opportunity to do so? Olivia talked about how her students see, hear, and think about social issues and need a place to explore them. She believed that should be the classroom and this incident, while initially jarring, reinforced that stance; the swirl of power produced resistance. In this case, the power that swirled from a family who challenged her work did not repress her motivation to teach for social justice. It did not prohibit or censor her desire, instead it further solidified her commitment to exploring issues of equity with her second grade students.

It is valuable to think about this incident in more than one way, to do the work of critical literacy and to value multiple perspectives. Ashley’s parents’ reaction to the family interview assignment was valid; their life experiences and histories influenced the educational opportunities they wanted for their child. Perhaps in seeking to have Ashley removed from Olivia’s classroom, her parents were attempting to advocate for their
daughter’s learning, to ensure that Ashley’s days were filled with reading, writing, math, and the joys of what they may have considered to be the innocence of childhood. Sending a critical email directly to the principal was a bold move, but families have every right to be protective of their children. Another way to think through this scenario is to consider that Ashley’s parents’ exercises of power led to what they believed was the optimal educational outcome for their daughter.

It was decided by Olivia and Ashley’s parents that Ashley would sit in the hallway with an iPad during social justice themed read alouds on Friday afternoons. Olivia had planned to start implementing social justice lessons on Thursday mornings in an attempt to harness beginning of the day energy and to utilize the longer chunk of instructional time. However, she did not want Ashley to miss out on two class periods each week, so with this resolution came the decision not to increase the frequency of social justice oriented lessons. Together, we wondered how Ashley was making sense of this new arrangement. Olivia was hesitant to talk to her about it, in fear of upsetting her family further.

Laura: I wonder what they (the parents) said to Ashley (about having to sit in the hallway during social justice read aloud time).

Olivia: I didn’t bring it up to her and I won’t but I’m just ...

Laura: ‘Cause what is the message she’s getting if she’s now suddenly out?

(conversation, April 7, p. 3).

Ashley was essentially left alone to navigate her new position in the classroom. A previously engaged and active participant during social justice read aloud time, she was now excluded from these lessons and sat in the hallway alone. Olivia did not want to
upset her family further, so she did not press the subject with Ashley. She paid close
attention, however, as Ashley figured out how to participate in social justice read alouds
within the boundaries her parents drew. At the end of the year, Olivia reflected further on
Ashley’s situation,

Laura: How do you think the whole thing (Ashley’s parents’ email) impacted
the child (Ashley)?

Olivia: I think at first she was sad … There were many times she’d try to sneak
back in to the classroom and get a pencil and ask a question, just hang out by the
cubbies. I think she wanted to feel included. I think that was the worst that
happened was that she was being made not to participate. I don’t think she fully
understood why. Because before mom sent the email, she was really one of the
most … I mean she had a lot to say about the conversations we were having. She
looked forward to it. She’d ask on Monday when we’re doing our social justice
lesson, what story we were going to read, could she read it early (interview, June
22, pp. 3-4).

Olivia admitted that the most severe consequence of this challenge to her social justice
agenda landed on Ashley. A previously eager participant was removed from her
classroom for reasons she may not have fully understood. In this case, power swirled
from Ashley’s parents with repressive effects; Ashley was the one who was punished.

That being said, power swirled within Ashely and she figured out how to resist the
confines of her situation. By creating excuses to come into the classroom during social
justice read alouds (i.e. to get a pencil), she chose to linger by the cubbies in order to
listen to the discussion taking place. As a vehicle of power (Foucault, 1980), Ashley’s
practices created new ways for her to participate in her world within the lines that were drawn around her.

“I’m Not Touching That Beast”

Olivia was not only upset that a family with whom she had a good relationship challenged her credibility, she was also hurt that she was abandoned by her administrators. Neither Susan nor Gabby (assistant principal) offered their vocal support. This was where their indifference to social justice work played an unfortunately key role. Olivia reflected, “It’s been like zero support… they (Susan and Gabby) were very accommodating to the parent which was disappointing” (conversation, April 6, p. 1).

While it appeared that Susan and Gabby had faith in Olivia’s teaching and they trusted she was doing high quality work in her classroom, when a challenge arose, they left her alone. There was no conversation regarding what was so controversial about the assignment, how they might support her, or even about what was happening in Olivia’s classroom. If Susan was upset by the parent complaint or had any opinion at all, she did not share that information with Olivia. Olivia recounted,

… Susan (the principal) said, “That’s (the situation around the parent email) a good reflection piece for you and Laura” and that was it. And I was like, “Let’s talk more about it.” She seemed a little frustrated and like she had something to say, but didn’t want to say it. So I don’t know if she was mad. I don’t know what she felt (conversation, April 7, p. 5).

This lack of communication deepened the void of Olivia’s understanding of Susan’s stance toward her social justice pedagogy. While it did not deter Olivia’s work,
it certainly caused her to take a step back to reflect upon her social justice agenda and its potential consequences.

_Susan could have been frustrated, as Olivia inferred, and perhaps did not want to be bothered with a parent complaint about a curricular issue toward which she was indifferent. Maybe Susan wanted nothing to do with Olivia’s social justice teaching and chose to ignore it while encouraging Olivia and me to think through its repercussions._

_Alternatively, this could have been Susan’s effort to support Olivia. By leaving Olivia and I alone, by not intervening and simply forwarding the email without comment, Susan’s exercises of power allowed the parent complaint to remain relatively small. Olivia and Ashley’s parents devised a plan for Ashley during social justice read aloud time and that was the end of it. Susan did not sanction Olivia’s teaching agenda or start monitoring her lesson plans, rather she essentially gave Olivia permission to proceed with her social justice agenda, despite a strong parent critique._

_Foucault urges us not to consider the intent behind exercises of power, but to focus on its multiple effects. We do not know Susan’s motivations, but we do know an effect was that Olivia felt abandoned by Susan during a professionally stressful time. That is important because the purpose of this dissertation is to analyze how the swirl of power impacted Olivia in the context of her social justice teaching. That being said, a tenet of critical literacy, a framework also key to this work, is to value multiple perspectives. While we will never know Susan’s intent, it is important to consider more than one version of this story._

_It was not surprising that a family took issue with questions about race. Race is a sensitive topic. Olivia didn’t want to press Susan for support, so she chose to do as she_
was told, sending Ashely into the hallway with an iPad each Friday afternoon. A couple weeks after Ashley’s parents sent the email, Olivia checked in with Susan to see if she had responded to them. Olivia explained,

I don’t know if she (Susan) just doesn’t know how (to offer support)… I asked her if she contacted her (the parent). She goes, ‘I’m not touching that beast.’ I’m like, ‘Ok.’ She’s like, ‘You took care of it.’ It’s like, ‘Ok, I guess I did’

(conversation, April 14, p. 1).

This five-word sentence, “I’m not touching the beast” provided the most direct stance toward Olivia’s social justice work that Susan offered during the entire school year. While it was unclear if “the beast” was the parent complaint, the social justice work, or something else entirely, Susan did not want to engage with either. By distancing herself from “the beast,” Susan communicated that she was unwilling to vocally support Olivia’s social justice agenda. Olivia described what she wished Susan would have done,

I wanted her (Susan) to speak more to how equity impacts the learning environment. I mean I didn’t expect her to speak on race or any particular piece, but just the fact that it (social justice pedagogy) helps build a culture, an atmosphere in the classroom so that kids are able to learn more effectively. Like even if she said that, that would have been OK for me. It’s clear that that parent just didn’t understand. … these issues (of bias and equity) take place on the playground, they take place on the buses. If we don’t address them, then they turn into something negative. I could have spoken with her (the parent) for an hour…

(conversation, April 14, p. 2).

This lack of support from her administrators initially produced within Olivia a sense of
hurt. While she hoped to be protected or at least have an ally when she was professionally challenged, instead her administrators offered no vocal support and accommodated the family. There was no compromise or discussion about what the concern actually was; rather Olivia was told to make it better and she did. She made it better for Ashley’s parents and for the Susan, but not for Ashley or herself.

While not forcefully with strong words or punitive measures, power swirled from Susan, toward Olivia with repressive effects. It was a quiet version of repression that initially came in the form of a forwarded email. From there, Susan’s lack of support and word choice (“I’m not touching that beast”) imposed decisions upon Olivia and Ashley. Similarly, Ashley’s parents never directly sanctioned Olivia, but by communicating their disapproval with Susan and requesting Ashley be removed from social justice read aloud time, repressive effects of power swirled. Olivia felt that her professional credibility was questioned and Ashley was excluded from learning experiences she enjoyed.

With the repressive effects of power, however, are the productive effects (Foucault, 1980). Olivia took the time she needed to process the situation and through her reflection, she was energized in her mission to teach for social justice. During our conversations about this situation, Olivia’s voice filled with emotion. Her resolve was tangible. The effects of the parent email and subsequent lack of support from her administrators produced in Olivia a renewed commitment to create space for children to explore issues of equity and bias. She also had the support of the “powerful” and considered contacting the superintendent, Dr. Baylor, for support, if needed.
Olivia reflected on how this situation impacted her, beginning with the hurtful aspects, but as she continued talking, she proudly claimed the value of her social justice agenda.

**Olivia:** That whole think was just really ... I’m still processing. Who it was (the particular family) … It sounded like she (the mom) was questioning or attacking my teaching ability. So that was one issue, and then just the fact that she (the mom) didn’t want her (Ashley) to participate at all and it was …. I mean the thing she complained about, you know, why does my kid have to participate in topics of race beauty, success, culture. All of that is education, and I mean if we taught reading, writing and math we would be here for three hours. And she mentioned that they were too young and it was inappropriate. And another response she said, “My older children didn’t learn that. Is this something that is a part of the curriculum?” I almost thought about sending it to Dr. Baylor and just saying …because she kind of questioned the curriculum, it just seemed like something that could end up going a lot farther than our building, and he’s been sending me books… (conversation, April 7, pp. 3-4).

Olivia thought through the many points Ashley’s parents made in their email. She was recovering from the attack on her teaching from a family she got along well with, she was trying to reconcile Ashley being forced to leave the classroom during social justice read aloud time, she was steadfast in her stance that school is more than reading, writing, and math, and she even considered seeking support from the superintendent, Dr. Baylor.

Ashley’s parents questioned the curriculum, as Ashely’s older siblings did not engage in similar learning experiences exploring racial bias. Several of the read alouds
Ashley missed were books that Dr. Baylor, the head administrator of the district, sent to Olivia. While Susan, the building principal did not extend support, Olivia was willing to use her relationship with Dr. Baylor to validate her pedagogical decisions, if needed.

Olivia’s book sharing relationship with Dr. Baylor embedded her in a new power network (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). This network produced a level of confidence and created a new way for her to respond to this parent complaint, if needed.

Ashley’s parents also argue that Ashley is too young to learn about sensitive topics like race; discussing difference in this way is inappropriate for second graders. This is not a surprise; ironically just before the email arrives, Olivia discusses potential difficulties of gaining parent approval.

I think that’s the hardest part and getting parents on board. And a lot of people, there is a lot of pushback because people think that second graders are too young to talk about these topics, and you should wait until middle school or even high school. By that time I think it’s not too late to undo thinking but damage has been done in a sense. I think that’s one of the hardest parts (interview, March 31, p. 3).

This is a commonly held assumption among adults and demonstrates the dominant discourse around early childhood education. While it is true children have less life experience than adults, that does not render them incapable of engaging in topics of equity and justice. Vasquez (2015) writes,

My experience in working with young children has proven time and time again that children are in fact very capable and willing to participate in hard conversations that are meaningful to them and that impact their lives. Sometimes it is adults that have difficulty with this, often due to a feeling of uncertainty
regarding how to talk about difficult topics or issues with children. When this happens the literacies with which they can participate in the world are ‘bound’ since children are only able to speak using the discourses that have been made available to them or to which they have had access. This implies that part of schooling, therefore, needs to be about making accessible dominant and powerful discursive practices that create spaces for young learners to participate differently in the world (pp. 44-45).

Olivia’s motivation to teach for social justice aligns with Vasquez’s experience as a teacher and a researcher—school is the place for children to explore sociopolitical topics, to question and to engage in issues that matter to them, to learn skills of advocacy. More often than not, it is the adults, in this case Ashley’s parents, who hold young children back from social justice oriented learning experiences.

As time moved on, the year ended calmly. Ashley sat in the hallway (and sometimes found her way into the classroom) during social justice read aloud time; her parents were satisfied. Susan and Gabby continued to leave Olivia alone, and each Friday afternoon Olivia and her students settled in for a read aloud. At the end of the year, Olivia reflected on the repercussions of the parent email,

Laura: Do you feel that the parent email and your administrators’ lack of vocal support made you more aware or regulated you in any away to keep it (social justice pedagogy) tame or…safe?

Olivia: I didn’t want to change anything. What it made me feel is that the district just needs more equity training. So I didn’t want to change anything. I mean I guess… for that particular parent I guess I needed to tone some things down and
then we decided to have her daughter not to participate in the first place. At that
time I wanted to sit down with my principal and say “This is what I learned and
what I’ve been taught. This (social justice read aloud time) is important for us to
do.”

Laura: So how … what do you think about it now (two months later)?

Olivia: I still feel the same way…Of course people are always so shocked and
appalled when they hear it. But I think it’s (resistance to social justice teaching)
more common than one would expect. It’s hard to talk about race. I think that of
any of the identities that we discussed, that’s probably one of the hardest ones to
talk about. But I do think next year my plan is to be a lot more specific in what
we’ll be talking about. I may even share a book list, a description with the
parents, so that they don’t have a reason to say they weren’t aware. (interview,
June 22, pp. 3-4).

Overall, the parent email produces a desire within Olivia to keep going with her social
justice work. As she said, “I’m very shocked. But, even more motivated to proceed. Can’t
let this one incident stop the party” (personal communication regarding the parent email,
April 4).

Teachers have the difficult job of pleasing different people (i.e., administrators,
parents, students, themselves) throughout the course of a school year. Parental concerns
must be taken seriously, as the care and education of people’s children is an incredibly
important job. The ideal set up would be collaborative, where families, teachers, and
administrators work together with mutual respect to create the optimal learning
environment for children. In this instance there were multiple fissures in Ashley’s
educational alliance: Ashley’s parents refused to meet with Olivia. Susan did not respond to Ashley’s parents, Susan did not work with Olivia to problem-solve. Power swirled through each of these fissures.

Ashley’s parents made a “power play” by going straight to Susan with their concern. Susan was Olivia’s boss and Ashley’s parents knew she could mandate what happens in Olivia’s classroom. Instead of expressing their concerns about the assignment directly to Olivia in an attempt to work through it together, their decision to talk to Susan first kept power moving up the chain of command. This was perhaps an effort to unleash power’s repressive effects.

When Susan forwarded the parent email to Olivia without comment, she also kept the repressive effects of power on the move. Receiving an email like that from the principal, left Olivia little hope that she would be supported by the administration. Olivia felt left alone, or as she described, like she had “zero support.” Without support from the principal, Olivia had few options.

Foucault (1978) writes, “Productive power is not its own entity, as something to be taken and given away. Power forms a chain that relies on relations (even those that are restrictive) to advance, multiply, and branch out deeply into social networks (p. 42). Power swirled around and through Olivia as she navigated the parent email situation. It flowed through the relations between Olivia, Ashley’s parents, and Susan. These relations were embedded in local contexts and continued interactions among these actors kept the flow of power in motion. For example, Ashley’s parents refused to meet with Olivia to discuss their curricular concerns; an effect of this flow of power was that Olivia’s commitment to advancing equity within the district was strengthened. As Olivia
struggled with the repressive effects of power (i.e., her principal’s abandonment; feeling attacked by Ashley’s parents) a stronger commitment to her social justice pedagogy was produced. Through these challenges, her work was further validated.

Conclusion

Olivia negotiated around several actors and factors during her quest to teach for social justice. These included her own personal memories, the school media specialist, the district superintendent, students, and families all of which impacted her commitment to create a social justice atmosphere in her second grade classroom. Through each move she made, power swirled and its effects produced something(s) within and around her. To further study these instances, I engaged the data and theory with this analytical question: What did the exercises of power that flow from/in/around/through __________, produce within and around Olivia in the context of her social justice teaching?

Like Jackson and Mazzei (2012), I was interested in how power was “kept on the move” (p 65), how it swirled in one direction, producing meaningful read aloud experiences for her students, and then shifted course, producing moments of challenge and reflection that eventually instilled confidence within Olivia to pursue her social justice agenda. Thinking with a Foucauldian conceptualization of power kept my focus on the effects of power, as opposed to the meaning or intent behind exercises of power. For example, for the purposes of this study, attempting to understand the motivation behind Ashley’s parents’ objections to social justice teaching was impossible. Foucault (1978) writes, “Consider not the level of indulgence or quantity of repression, but the form of power that was exercised” (p. 41). What was worth pursuing, then, were the multiple effects of this exercise of power. Power was constantly in motion, it never stood
still, but rather flowed through the sets of relations working around and within Olivia. By tracking the swirl of power, power networks, such as Olivia’s books sharing relationship with Dr. Baylor were made visible and were considered in terms of their effects on Olivia’s social justice teaching.

Power relations are specific to local contexts and mutual relationships (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Through these relations, practices of power are enacted. Power swirled within and through practices – the practices of remembering, of talking with colleagues, of forming a book sharing relationship with the head administrator, of read aloud experiences with students. Throughout the course of this study, I sought to learn what happens when power swirled around and through Olivia and how it supported or hindered her social justice pedagogy. While it is likely that throughout her teaching career, Olivia may continue to face opposition to her social justice agenda, she is a vehicle of power whose responses produce new ways for her to remain committed to her pedagogical goals. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) write, “Power produces things, such as knowledge, subjectivity, and resistance” (p. 61). Through Olivia’s journey, it is clear that the swirl of power also produces motivation.
Chapter 5: Insights Gained

I have been asked by several people what I’ve found through my dissertation research. When describing this inquiry to my aunt, she asked how the pre-test results differ from the post-test. In the current educational climate, assessment is prioritized. My aunt automatically assumed my dissertation quantified some sort of change in student performance. I explained to her that’s not exactly how this study works.

The purpose of this inquiry was not to measure change; I did not seek to develop a curricular program that could be replicated and applied to any classroom setting, achieving expected results. In fact, it is crucial upon reading these chapters to understand that what is represented is absolutely context-dependent. The thinking documented on these pages is specific to the experiences of Olivia, her students, and colleagues.

I did not design this study to provide concrete, measurable benefits to teaching for social justice. Rather, these chapters tell a story of one teacher’s pedagogical journey and may impact educational policy and practices in local settings. My hope is that those who take the time to read about Olivia’s experiences are compelled to think more about both the challenges and the benefits of teaching young children about issues of equity, bias, and oppression, along with how a teacher might experience the pedagogical journey. It was in reading the stories of critical literacy in other classrooms (i.e., Cowhey, 2006; Vasquez, 2004; 2010) that I was moved to scrutinize my own biases, to create space for my students to interrogate the status quo, and to internalize the idea that teaching is not neutral. If this dissertation (or future published iterations) has a similar impact on any of its readers, a contribution will be made.
That being said, I discuss four contributions this work makes to the academic community of early childhood literacy; three speak directly to teaching and the fourth connects to theory. They are: first, a depiction of the processes, decisions, and roadblocks a teacher faces as she strives to teach using the tenets of critical literacy; second, implications for teacher education programs; third, in-service supports for teachers and school staff members interested in social justice teaching; and fourth, the affordances of using a post-structural lens to think with critical literacy research.

**A Portrayal of Critical Literacy in Action**

We need to hear a teacher’s perspective on using a critical literacy framework because we can’t talk about curricular framing without talking about its implementation. Olivia’s journey describes both frictions and successes that arose when implementing critical teaching practices with young children, both of which fueled her motivation to proceed. There is not enough literature available to practitioners and researchers about the processes, decisions, and roadblocks of using a critical literacy pedagogical framework with young children. When analyzing texts (i.e., read aloud books), critical literacy practitioners often ask, “Whose voice is missing?” Likewise, we need to be asking “whose voice is missing” in research studies on critical literacy. In many cases, the teacher’s behind-the-scenes pedagogical decisions are absent. Using interview excerpts, this study showcased a teacher’s thinking throughout the daily challenges and triumphs of her social justice teaching.

**Olivia’s Challenges**

Olivia confronted several challenges related to her social justice agenda, including: securing the necessary pedagogical resources (read aloud books), facilitating
conversations with her students around them, and absorbing backlash from a family. These can be considered “roadblocks” as each had to be overcome in order for her to move forward with her teaching. Each affected her teaching in that she had to pause to consider how to move forward – how to obtain a collection of read aloud books, how to guide sensitive discussions with students, how to address a parent concern. She expressed her uncertainty about aspects of teaching for social justice and acknowledged this is hard work, though her commitment never wavered. Her story provides the behind-the-scenes thinking that admits this work is complicated. I discuss how she navigated these obstacles and what we can learn from her journey.

The Unexpected Consequences of Reaching Out

While Olivia purchased read aloud books with her own money to use in her classroom, she also expected her school to provide adequate resources to her students. When she realized the lack of books that reflected the student body in both the Book Room and the Media Center, she pursued opportunities to change this. By expressing her concern to Rhonda, the deputy superintendent and fostering unexpected collaborations with Beth, the media specialist, and Dr. Baylor, the superintendent, she began to fill in this literary gap. She is fortunate that Beth and Dr. Baylor immediately supported her mission.

While there is no guarantee that when a teacher asks for help her colleagues will respond, attention to this part of Olivia’s journey is important. Her moves to secure resources were at times spontaneous, but some yielded influential results. For example, our examination of her school’s Book Room was unplanned. As Olivia and I discussed ways for Olivia to implement social justice texts into her guided reading instruction one
day after school, we decided to take a walk down the hallway to investigate what resources her school had to offer. After finding few options, Olivia chose to engage Beth in a conversation about school book choice, though she did not expect Beth to immediately purchase a new collection of texts. Furthermore, Dr. Baylor’s support of Olivia’s social justice pedagogy was not predicted. She reached out to him because of their professional relationship and he chose to respond.

As Foucault (1980) urges, it is the effects of power that are worth pursuing. These micro-practices of power flowing through, around, and from Olivia produced something(s) that supported her social justice goals. Olivia’s actions demonstrated that reaching out to colleagues can have unexpected positive effects. While teaching for social justice in relative isolation, Olivia had under-the-radar support from Dr. Baylor and Beth. Their exercises of power swirled around her, producing support for her social justice teaching. Interestingly, Beth and Dr. Baylor never communicated about their mutual involvement in Olivia’s work.

**Potential for Wider Collaboration**

What if Olivia, Dr. Baylor and Beth gathered together to discuss social justice read aloud time? What if Rhonda, Susan, Olivia’s grade-level colleagues, and even Ashley’s parents joined in the conversation? These people acting around Olivia in relation to her social justice pedagogy created the swirl I first thought about when I looked outside her classroom window on a windy day. Things were happening around her, people were ignoring, supporting and/or challenging her work. How could connections be made among all of these actors? This peripheral involvement in social justice teaching demonstrated that while Olivia felt alone at times, there were people
invested in her work, which presented opportunities to invite more colleagues into collaboration. Similarly, space could be created to educate those who opposed (Ashley’s parents) or ignored (Susan) her social justice focus.

A lack of communication among the peripheral actors impacted by Olivia’s work hindered broader collaboration around teaching for social justice. While Olivia was the epicenter of activity, she did not connect the superintendent and the media specialist, two people interested in her social justice agenda who supported her in isolation. Similarly, when confronted with Ashley’s parents’ opposition to her teaching, Olivia considered the option, but did not involve Dr. Baylor. Reaching out to the superintendent of the district who supported her work could have created an opportunity for Susan and Ashley’s parents to engage in conversation about social justice education and perhaps to reconsider their stances. People with status have influence. A particular kind of power swirls from Dr. Baylor, as he is essentially the boss of the school district. If he had supported Olivia’s work in front of Susan and Ashley’s parents, Ashley may not have ended up in the hallway with an iPad on Friday afternoons.

I believe what prevents joining these people in conversation is the controversial topic of “social justice.” While committed to exploring sociopolitical issues such as race with her students, Olivia said she did not want to make colleagues or families feel uncomfortable. As a result, she was unsure how to broach the topic of social justice teaching with other adults. An issue, such as race relations, is layered with personal histories, experiences, and points of view that embody both bias and privilege. Race is not the casual topic of conversation in the staff lunchroom.
If, for instance, Olivia implemented a new way to teach double-digit addition that Dr. Baylor and Beth supported, Susan was indifferent to, and Ashley’s parents opposed, coming together to talk about the issues with this curricular shift may not feel so awkward. It’s hard to imagine a principal declare, “I’m not touching that beast” about an approach to a basic math concept. Discussing race, as Olivia chose to do with her students, is controversial and makes people of all ages avoid eye contact in an effort to manufacture simpler times.

This swirl of activity around Olivia provides a behind-the-scenes view of Olivia’s journey to teach for social justice. It reveals the varying levels of support and engagement people had with her work—from Dr. Baylor’s quiet book sharing to Susan’s disinterest to Beth’s immediate support to Ashley’s parents’ resistance. This is part of Olivia’s journey of implementing a critical literacy framework in an early childhood classroom.

**Pedagogical Issues**

Another part of her pedagogical journey is the significant challenge of guiding students’ inquiries in ways that honor their perspectives, while pushing their thinking to consider different points of view. Olivia admitted that while she had a vision for a social justice atmosphere in her classroom, she did not know who to get there. Because of her firm commitment to social justice pedagogy, she independently read and researched about how to implement it. As described in Chapter 1, Olivia admitted she’s trying, but she doesn’t know how to bring it to life. This is an honest perspective rarely heard.

**Olivia:** …but I would like social justice in the next coming years to be just how we communicate with each other, just how we approach situations, just open
conversations where we can talk about topics, different topics, and kind of integrate those into the curriculum just naturally. I don’t know how to do that yet, so I’m still in the process of reading and researching and seeing how that’s done, but I think the best way to approach that now is through children’s literature so that kids can become familiar with those topics that they see and hear about on the news, that so deeply affect us (interview, March 31, p. 1).

Olivia admitted she didn’t know how to integrate her social justice teaching seamlessly into the curriculum. She was “in the process” of learning more about it, though she didn’t let this indecision pause her pedagogy. Unfortunately, reading literature about critical literacy practices in early childhood classrooms did not always represent the experience fully.

The following example condensed the process of using a critical literacy framework into a single linear paragraph. When describing a learning engagement around analyzing mother’s day advertisements in an effort to imagine other ways mothers can be represented, O’Brien (2015) wrote,

All students, including the youngest, were able to respond at a level appropriate to their age and ability as a consequence of my framing of instruction (Draw and label, the whole-class talk throughout the entire episode, and the mixed-age seating arrangements…I was pleased because they were having fun, class members were engaged in talking about issues, such as who benefits from the commercialization of Mother’s Day and the representation of mothers in junk mail. The episode offered my students a chance to develop critical understandings of their world; to examine the catalogues’ claim to be a ‘natural’ part of their everyday world (pp. 40-41).
O’Brien described critical literacy as “fun” and mentioned all students were engaged participants developing critical understandings. This sounds fantastic, however questions of implementation abound. Were there challenges or moments of pedagogical indecision? What kinds of classroom practices were in place before a lesson like this lesson took place? Were parents and administrators supportive of this kind of learning engagement?

Vasquez (2015) described a challenge to critical literacy work, What is difficult in creating these curricular spaces is resisting over-schooling the children’s topics and co-opting their interests thereby diminishing their pleasure with it. These spaces, therefore, need to be negotiated carefully with attention paid to the interests of the children” (p. 47).

It is descriptions like these that leave many blanks to be filled in by practicing teachers. How are these spaces negotiated? How is support gathered from hesitant families and administrators? Even though each teacher’s story will be different, learning the specifics of a teacher’s process may support other teachers on the similar pedagogical paths. Withholding such details of teaching using a critical literacy framework misses an opportunity to support teachers, like Olivia, who are in the process of such work. Reading accounts that describe successful critical literacy experiences provided inspiration and fueled Olivia’s imagination of what her pedagogy could become; reading about teachers’ struggles could be similarly supportive.

Absorbing Backlash

Despite Olivia’s efforts to learn, reflect, and plan social justice oriented lessons, it was impossible to please everyone, especially when exploring sensitive topics like race.
The email from Ashley’s parents offered the most substantial opposition to her work, and demonstrated a poignant example of what many teachers implementing critical literacy practices may face.

As mentioned, published literature tends to favor the victory narrative of critical literacy that portrays planning, teaching, and student engagement in a linear and smooth fashion. It is less common to find evidence of resistance to social justice pedagogy, specifically from a student’s family (for an example, see Blackmon, Darolia, & Oliva, 2013).

One concern Ashley’s parents mentioned was that Ashley was too young to notice and think about difference. It is a common worry among early childhood critical literacy practitioners that they will “cross a line” through their teaching that upsets families and/or administrators. Teaching about sociopolitical topics like race and poverty is controversial. These topics are sensitive and mean different things to different people based on life experiences. Families may teach their children one stance at home and to have that contradicted in the classroom may be jarring, especially when young children, who, according to the dominant discourse around early childhood education, are understood to be innocent and happy, are involved. Leland, Harste, and Huber (2015) write,

An example of this dominant discourse was shared by a student teacher we once had who was momentarily stunned when a child in her classroom stated during a literature discussion, ‘All black people carry guns and kill people.’ When the student teacher suggested this might be a stereotype and not true, the child responded adamantly that it was true because his parents told him so (p. 96).
While families are of course free to teach their children as they wish, Olivia strived to create the space in her classroom for open dialogue about sociopolitical issues, to provide opportunities for students to share their perspectives, while listening to and considering others. This kind of teaching is expected for older children, but it is a shock to some that young children can engage in it, too.

That being said, this work is incredibly valuable, especially when it begins at a young age. Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013) observe,

Teachers who actively engage in critical literacies are more likely to have students who are more reflexive, consciously engaged, and students who take on alternate ways of being, as well as take responsibility for inquiring into issues of importance for them (p. 20).

The skills mentioned above: reflexivity, engagement, inquiring into meaningful issues can become habits of mind that foster critical thinking and democratic involvement.

Lessons framed from a critical literacy stance do not promote rote learning, filling in the blanks on tests, or performing only to earn high scores on a rubric. Rather, exploring sociopolitical issues and engaging in discussion including multiple perspectives, considering bias and privilege, thinking through open-ended questions such as, “Why is it like this? How could it be different?” requires students to consume information, consider all sides of a story, and determine their own position.

**What Can We Learn from Olivia’s Experiences?**

As mentioned, we cannot talk about curricular innovation without talking about its implementation. Teaching from a critical literacy framework is personal, it is complicated, and it is important. Cultivating a student population who thinks critically,
considers multiple perspectives, and acts in the name of social justice is vital for the
maintenance of our democratic society. Young children are ready, willing, and able to
engage in discussion and exploration of sociopolitical issues and they deserve to do so.

Leland, Harste, and Huber (2015) observe,

While we might wish that children did not have to deal with issues like racism,
poverty, and war, the fact of the matter is that many children are deeply concerned
about these and other difficult issues when they walk into our classrooms. Ignoring what they need to help understand and deal with (it) is not productive or humane” (p. 98).

Teachers who engage in this work must be prepared for the challenges that may
arise. Whether in the form of personal lesson planning indecision, lack of clarity on how
to respond to children’s questions, family opposition, or any other source of friction,
those who teach for social justice need more opportunities to learn from others about how
to navigate challenges and persevere. Kelly and Brooks (2009) issue a call for more
teachers to share their processes,

Educational researchers have helped to develop a number of conceptual
approaches to understanding the notion of equity, including an anti-oppressive
approach to teaching for social justice. Yet across a number of different
approaches, surprisingly little research appears to have been done on the
intellectual labor that teachers perform (or might perform) as they develop and
enact inclusive curricula and pedagogies while simultaneously adapting these to
the cognitive, emotional, and political-evaluative capacities of their students.
Explicit accounts of what teaching for social justice looks like in practice are sparse, particularly in the primary grades (K-3)” (pp. 202-203).

Without exemplars of the processes, decisions, and roadblocks of implementing a critical literacy framework, teachers may abandon their efforts due to frustration or fatigue. They may acquiesce to administrators or families who oppose the work in favor of the safety of a teacher guide. Olivia’s experiences will not be replicated in different settings, as they are particular to her context, but her journey illuminates some of the issues that accompany social justice teaching.

Both novice and experienced teachers may benefit from understanding the successes and struggles one teacher experienced when trying to implement a critical literacy pedagogical framework in her early childhood classroom; doing so may help prepare them to confront similar circumstances. Olivia’s journey may also provide comfort, inspiration, and guidance for those engaged in similar work. Given the value of teaching for social justice in early childhood classrooms, it is important to consider how to cultivate and support more teachers who are willing to do so through thorough depictions of the process.

**Implications for Teacher Education Programs**

Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs have the potential to hone critically minded educators. Incorporating coursework that explores personal bias and privilege can help teachers understand that teaching is not neutral. Reading literature that details critical literacy in action in early childhood settings may inspire future or in-service teachers to create similar possibilities for their own students and could underscore
the idea that young children are ready and able to engage in discussions and action around sociopolitical issues.

**Motivation is Key**

An interesting trend in Olivia’s pedagogical journey is her constant motivation to teach for social justice. Olivia was consistently encouraged by the events surrounding her social justice teaching. Whether challenges to her pedagogy (i.e., the parent email) or expressions of support (i.e., book sharing with the superintendent), Olivia used the circumstances as fuel for her work. As described, she had her own reasons for pursuing a social justice agenda, including childhood memories of curricular marginalization and wanting to provide a space for students to explore sociopolitical issues. However, not every early childhood teacher walks into her classroom with a firm commitment to teaching about issues like race.

For me, a graduate course, seven years into my teaching career, introduced me to the idea that teaching is not neutral and I began to rethink not only my curricular approach, but also what I considered the purpose of education to be. My undergraduate preparation did not address anything remotely related to critical literacy. I learned how to write lesson plans and design interdisciplinary units. I spent hours in the field, working with students and observing teachers. I student taught in a second grade classroom and followed the teacher guides. I remember being excited to lead the class in a quiet single-file line to art class. I felt like a “real” teacher as I navigated the hallways with a class of obedient students behind me. I was motivated to stay on track with the curricular schedule, to grade weekly spelling tests in a timely manner, and to be sure students raised their hands in order to speak. I was a typical teacher providing the typical classroom
experience. But there is so much more to teaching. Teachers like Olivia, innately focused on a “social justice atmosphere” already know this. Teachers like me, may not.

Motivation, however, cannot necessarily be taught or manufactured. Motivation is intrinsic and happens when you commit to something that matters to you. Olivia was passionate about teaching for social justice, so whether thwarted or encouraged, she was motivated to continue striving toward her pedagogical goals.

Novice teachers without an inherently critical lens need the space to explore the idea that teaching is not neutral and to learn about pedagogical possibilities outside of standard, teacher guide-driven teaching. Even those teachers like Olivia, who enter the classroom with a social justice agenda need guidance and support to create the atmosphere or live the curriculum. Teacher preparation programs and graduate courses are spaces where teachers can begin to understand a critical literacy framework.

**Teaching is Not Neutral**

In order to begin to unpack the idea that teaching is not neutral, teachers must engage in ethnographic practices of reflection (Kuby, 2013). Such exercises unearth biases and tacit understandings of how the world operates. Teachers must name and scrutinize moments of personal privilege and marginalization and consider how they impact their interactions with students and society at large. This is the beginning of living a critically literate life and will influence a teacher’s ability to better support the investigation of the pressing issues in her classrooms, local, and global communities. This intensely personal work requires time, commitment, and a willingness to lean into discomfort.

Educators come into schools with their own experiences and worldviews that cloak their classroom spaces. Before critical literacy can be implemented as a legitimate
pedagogical framework, teachers and administrators alike must also (re)evaluate their educational stances. What is the purpose of schools? What kinds of learning experiences should children have? What skills/values/understandings should children carry with them at the end of the year? What are the literacy non-negotiables? This version of an educational philosophy (Vasquez, Tate, & Hartse, 2013) must be revisited and revised consistently; it will forever be a living perspective influencing educators’ work with children. It emphasizes a lack of neutrality to name your intent, your purpose in/for teaching. Teaching positions students in particular ways and that must be acknowledged by educators. The practices of self-reflection and the consistent scrutinizing of what education is all about reveal should be staples of coursework for educators. We teach who we are and that matters to our students. Kelly and Brooks (2009) explain,

Teaching is inevitably political because it involves decisions that affect both the distribution of power, status, resources, and opportunities as well as whose knowledge is recognized and validated. When teachers facilitate classroom discussions, for example, they must decide which issues to recognize as worthy of class time, or in using a particular textbook, teachers can elect to draw students’ attention to the omission or sidelining of subordinated groups—or not. In other words, teachers cannot be value neutral, even though the discourse of teacher neutrality currently circulates as common sense (p. 203).

Olivia’s experiences, including her childhood memories, influenced her teaching. Her personal interest in current events, specifically around race relations (i.e., Trayvon Martin) guided her lesson planning. Through the read alouds she chose, she welcomed topics like segregation and identity into the classroom, making them worthy of
discussion. She asked questions that elicited silenced perspectives and imagined more equitable social spaces. Her pedagogy transcended a scripted teacher guide. For Olivia, the purpose of school was to provide the space for her students to explore the topics that mattered to them, to question how things were, and to consider multiple perspectives. She believed that this, more than following a guide, was truly teaching.

**Young Children are Ready and Able**

Once early childhood educators connect with their own social histories, their biases and privileges, it is crucial they come to understand that young children are capable of engaging in discussion about sociopolitical issues. Olivia’s students demonstrated that they noticed and thought about race throughout the school year. Using racial slurs (“brownie”), preconceived notions about who can have what kind of job (principals are white) and discomfort with naming someone else’s race are just some of the ways her students’ perceptions about race manifested in her classroom. Students deserve to be able to discuss, question, and explore issues that matter to them; they need teachers who are willing to facilitate such work. Kelly and Brooks (2009) argue,

Teaching for social justice necessarily entails classroom discussions of inequities and injustice. A commonly expressed concern is that such a focus will simply make children feel badly or lead to harmful and divisive talk. Some adults believe that younger children are uninterested in the events of the day, are incapable of forming nuanced opinions, and are unable to analyze political issues. When children are considered highly impressionable, teachers feel compelled to avoid controversial issues and to be careful not to “indoctrinate” children with their own opinions (p. 204).
Olivia struggled with the notion of imposing her beliefs on her students, but she persevered in order to provide spaces for children to explore issues that mattered to them. She believed in what she was doing and she kept going. Pre-service and in-service early childhood educators must afford their students the respect they deserve. Just because children have few years of life experiences does not make them empty vessels to fill. These two key concepts: teaching is not neutral and young children have the ability to explore sociopolitical topics should be significant components of post-secondary early childhood education curricula.

**In-Service Opportunities**

**Professional Development**

Once in the classroom, teachers continue to need education, support, and guidance around social justice teaching. Partnering with faculty members at a local university might provide support in planning and implementing staff in-services. When I taught in Washington, D.C., I invited Vivian Vasquez to my school to present on critical literacy at a faculty meeting. As I began to shift my pedagogical framework, I found it difficult to succinctly explain critical literacy to colleagues who were interested. Having an academic talk through its tenets with theoretical backing and empirical examples guaranteed that at least each teacher heard about this pedagogical approach.

Consider Beth. She was interested in social justice, but did not independently act upon her interest. When confronted by Olivia about the lack of culturally responsive books available to students, she immediately responded with support. If Olivia never engaged her, Beth may have kept quiet about her social justice stance, creating a lost opportunity for the school. If Beech Elementary had staff-wide professional development
opportunities about teaching for social justice (perhaps including a discussion questioning the neutrality of teaching along with time for personal reflection), Beth and other quietly like-minded colleagues would have the chance to learn more and to collaborate.

While this sounds fairly straightforward, isolated instances of professional development will not suffice, especially considering the sensitive nature of questioning the status quo, first as adults, and then with young children. In addition, schools must have visionary leaders who support social justice work or who are at least willing to learn more about it. Based on her lack of interest in Olivia’s teaching and her blatant abandonment when Olivia was challenged by Ashley’s parents, it is hard to imagine Susan being a principal who would proactively create opportunities for her staff to learn more about social justice pedagogy. Interestingly, however, her boss Dr. Baylor, might. As a classroom teacher, Olivia’s influence was limited (she had less clout than an administrator), but through her participation with the Equity Team and Minority Recruitment Committee, she found ways to advance a social justice agenda throughout the district.

**Being Willing to Engage**

If a principal doesn’t want to engage in social justice work because of its controversial nature, she must also make time to problematize the idea of the neutral educator and to engage in self-reflection. A significant component of learning about social justice pedagogy is first to be willing to do so and then to value multiple perspectives. This may sound unnecessarily basic, but it is key. Educators approach their craft in different ways based upon life experience and training. Whether someone has years of experience in the field or the passion and energy of a newcomer, individuals’ dedication to education are to
be valued and respected. Susan undoubtedly had her reasons for her disinterested stance toward Olivia’s social justice teaching and her (lack of) response to Ashley’s parents. The position from which she operates is valid and deserves respect. Teachers must commit to appreciating alternate perspectives on pedagogy and the fact that life experience impacts educational worldviews. Wading through difference to find common ground is quite possible, though it requires patience and finesse. Engaging administrators and colleagues in dialogue about the purpose of education may not be a popular topic, but the work has potential to serve students in powerful ways.

**Network with Like-Minded Educators**

With or without on-site school supported professional development, like-minded social justice educators can develop networks of support. I shared pertinent literature with Olivia and we debriefed about her social justice teaching on a weekly basis. Having someone to collaborate with was important to her. She excitedly described lessons or moments in the classroom I missed, proudly sharing her students’ questions and noticings about read alouds or current events. She contacted me the day she received the email from Ashley’s parents to express her shock. Olivia and I reflected, problem-solved, vented, questioned, planned, and honestly, had fun together as we designed social justice lessons for her students.

Classroom teachers are busy. Olivia did not have time to record and transcribe read alouds in order to create the audit trail. She also did not have access to academic articles about critical literacy. I was able to help her with both areas. I recorded, transcribed, and wrote quotes for the audit trail and I shared reading material with her that I thought would support her pedagogical journey. This researcher/teacher partnership has
incredible potential.

Teachers using a critical literacy framework need support. Forming study groups within a school, a district, or even long-distance who read and discuss books and articles about critical literacy, is one way to maintain momentum. Local universities could also provide support in this realm. Faculty members have access to research journals they could share with teachers. It is necessary to (re)read and (re)discuss literature around critical literacy with peers in order to begin to understand its potential. Theory-based articles will ground the approach in specific worldviews, both broadly and in direct relation to pedagogy, while empirical writing will provide the visuals for how this work has come to life in various settings. There are no scripts for living and negotiating curriculum. Concerted effort to read, write, think, and talk with others about the possibilities and challenges of critical literacy may serve as a guide.

Tell the Stories

Maya’s revelation about her racial identity, Willow’s and Andre’s newly honed critical lenses, Sam being “on fire for justice,” Dante admitting he’s proud of his mom and she should be proud, too. When all else fails to garner attention or gather support for social justice teaching, tell the stories. Share the victory narratives from published literature, describe moments in classrooms you’ve witnessed, talk through challenges and triumphs, with a keen focus on the children. Detail their wonderings, their noticings, their suggestions for redesign, their wisdom, their empathy, their staunch senses of justice and everything else that is elicited during a social justice read aloud or other learning experiences grounded in critical literacy. Let social justice pedagogy speak for itself
through the words of the children who experience it. That may be enough to cause people to pause for a moment and to consider the possibilities.

**Theoretical Implications**

Scholarship in the field of early childhood literacy has used Foucauldian concepts to explore curricular limitations and possibilities. For example, Woods and Henderson (2008) applied a post-structural lens, specifically the internalized the gaze of the institution (Foucault, 1978) to problematize Reading Recovery instruction, while Hassett (2006) called upon Foucault’s concept of technologies of sign systems to complicate educators’ reliance upon the English alphabet and concepts of print as primary tools of reading instruction. She advocated for expanding the idea of what it means to be a reader, what counts as text, and how to plan early literacy instruction. Other researchers called upon Foucault’s (1977) concepts of docile bodies and discipline to analyze how students are conditioned as literacy learners. For example, Manyak (2004) analyzed the consequences of reading group practices on culturally and linguistically diverse students and Kontovourki (2012) wrote about how children were constituted as effects of power while becoming agents of articulation. This article specifically used a Foucauldian stance toward power to understand how young readers disciplined themselves and others when introduced to new reading practices.

This dissertation contributes to the body of early childhood literacy influenced by Foucault in a different way. My work uses a Foucauldian conception of power to explore the processes, questions, and roadblocks a teacher experienced while implementing critical literacy practices in her second grade classroom. Applying a post-structural lens to Olivia’s journey shifted my thinking away from an oppressor/oppressed view of power
that supports critical literacy and instead moved it toward the flow of power from, through, and around Olivia. This transition significantly influenced my thinking about the data produced. My focus was not on curricular limitations or student behavior, but rather on how Olivia negotiated the actors and factors around her in pursuit of her social justice goals.

Using Foucault’s conceptualization of power as productive and flowing through sets of relations challenged my oppressor/oppressed view of power. Following the effects of power that swirled through, around, and from Olivia, instead of thinking about power as a force imposed upon her, shifted my focus to the productive effects of the micro-practices of power. A key part of this was seeing Olivia as a vehicle of power (Foucault, 1980); someone who took control of her situation in several instances.

Considering the productive nature of power changed my understanding of the research space. I sought evidence of what power produced, instead of what it regulated. I observed Olivia’s responses to the people around her and considered how she kept power in motion. A significant example being when she spoke to her school media specialist about the low inventory of books about social justice, which led to the purchase of a new collection.

Through a Foucauldian conception of power, my lens remained focused on what was produced, in other words, how support for Olivia’s social justice agenda came from these expressions of power. Even when power was implemented in a way that challenged Olivia’s commitment to social justice education (i.e., the parent email), a desire was produced within her that strengthened her resolve to teach for social justice for the sake of her students. As she said, “I’m even more motivated to proceed. Can’t let
this stop the party” (personal communication, April 4, 2016). While from a critical standpoint, this incident might be written about in terms of the family oppressing Olivia’s work through their questioning of her teaching abilities, adopting a post-structural Foucauldian conception of power helped me to consider how Olivia became a vehicle of power, resisting potential repressive effects (Foucault, 1980).

Post-structuralists contend that multiple truths exist, thus those universally accepted can be challenged. Olivia challenged the traditional curriculum expected for early childhood students. She chose read aloud books that invited conversation about race, identity, and poverty and created the space for her seven and eight-year-old students to share their perspectives and imagine social redesign. Each social justice pedagogical decision she made, each response she had to the reactions her work provoked (i.e., Beth ordering books, Ashley’s parents’ challenge), was a micro-practice of power that propelled her work forward.

**Looking for New Connections**

A benefit of adopting a Foucauldian stance toward power and tracking these micro-practices is that we can look for new connections to be made, new opportunities for collaboration. For example, as mentioned above, tracking Olivia’s interactions with Beth and Dr. Baylor invite the possibility of bringing these two willing supporters of social justice read aloud time together. How might power continue to swirl when people unite around the same cause?

Following the swirl of power led me to Olivia’s personal experience as an influential memory, to the impact social justice read alouds had on her students, to consider the effects of Susan’s indifference and Ashley’s parents’ opposition to her work.
In other words, my focus narrowed from the wide lens of oppression to the more subtle expressions of power that impacted Olivia’s pedagogical goals. This enabled me to consider the consequences of each expression and what spaces could be opened up to further support a social justice agenda.

**Conclusion**

Olivia’s journey to teach for social justice in an early childhood classroom offers a thorough depiction of the complexities involved. An opportunity exists for both researchers and practitioners to pursue study of the challenges and triumphs of implementation so we can all continue to learn from the teachers who commit themselves to this work and the students with whom they engage.

Through their participation in social justice read aloud time, Olivia’s students demonstrated that they thought about sociopolitical topics; they had opinions and questions about race. For Olivia, creating space to explore topics such as homelessness and racism with her students brought her teaching alive. She reflected,

> I get so excited for…Friday (social justice read aloud time). I get to teach. I can teach, not reading out of Lucy Calkin’s (literacy curriculum) book. You get real opinions (from students) and real … This is what teaching should be. That other stuff (basics of reading and writing) will come. It will come (interview, March 31, p. 13).

Children are not immune to political rhetoric. They listen. They watch. They notice. The world we live in right now needs our children to engage in the discussion and exploration of bias, privilege, and oppression. And we need them to start now. Early childhood teachers have the potential to harness critical thinking, to expose children to
multiple perspectives, and to influence the next generation to lead with compassion. Learning from Olivia’s journey, her successes and challenges, may inspire other educators to begin to walk down the path of teaching for social justice.
References


Children’s Literature References


Tenayuca's struggle for justice/La lucha de Emma Tenayuca por la justicia. San Antonio, TX: Wings Press.


Laura was born into a family of educators. Though initially resistant to the idea, it was not a surprise she chose to pursue a career in early childhood education. Her experiences growing up in Cincinnati, attending college in Chicago, teaching elementary school in San Jose, California, Washington, D.C., and Columbia Missouri all influence her commitment to teaching using a critical literacy framework.