

“Where are the core values of reading, writing, and math?” An elementary school teacher navigates parental opposition to her “social justice classroom”

Laura H. Darolia
University of Kentucky
Laura.darolia@uky.edu

Abstract

While implementing critical literacy practices and creating a “social justice classroom,” a second-grade teacher faces parental opposition when she purposefully explores race and identity with her students. A Foucauldian conceptualization of power follows the “swirl of power” as this teacher navigates her response to an unexpected curricular challenge. Data was analyzed using the process of “thinking with theory” (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012), putting theory and data in conversation with one another. Insights reveal what the swirl of power produced in the teacher, including how she became a “vehicle of power” (Foucault, 1980) in the midst of this professional challenge.

Keywords: critical literacy, social justice, Foucault, power, elementary

In an effort to explicitly value her students' identities and family backgrounds, Olivia (all names are pseudonyms), a Black 2nd grade teacher in a midsize Midwest college town, created a project with two parts: first, to fill an "identity bag" with three personally representative artifacts and second, to learn more about family history and personal identity by conducting an interview. Over spring break, students were instructed to ask a family member a specific set of questions, record the responses, and come back to school ready to share. Olivia used the sources Facing History (www.facinghistory.org) and Teaching Tolerance (www.tolerance.org) to design this interview protocol:

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 returned from spring break to find an angry email from a White student's parents in her inbox. The parents sent the email directly to Mrs. Briggs, the principal, who forwarded it to Olivia without comment. In the email, they explained that Ashley, their daughter, is a happy child who does not see difference. They strongly disagreed with discussion about race in second grade and requested that Ashley be removed from Olivia's class. It was question number five:

“Do different people have different perspectives on race, skin color, and beauty? Why?” that upset them.

This incident represents a relevant challenge to critical literacy educators today. Those who bravely teach about sociopolitical issues in an effort to disrupt oppression and prepare justice-oriented citizens to answer the question, “How should we live together” (Hess and McAvoy, 2015, p. 15) may very well face backlash from colleagues, administrators, and families. We are living in a time when racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and sexist policies are blatantly endorsed at the national level. Therefore, it is crucial for literacy educators to share experiences, challenges, and insights into teaching effectively within this political climate.

My Relationship with Olivia

Olivia and I were grade level teammates two years before this incident occurred. We taught second grade in a school that prioritized fidelity to curricular schedules. 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 sociopolitical issues and by deviating from curricular scripts; we created opportunities to do so. For example, we read aloud books about oppression (i.e., *Separate is never equal*, Tonatiuh, 2014) and discussed related current events (i.e., the death of Nelson Mandela). We only taught together for one year, but stayed in close touch. Olivia moved to Beech Elementary, the brand-new school within the same district, and she agreed to partner with me on a study about her process of creating what she called a “social justice classroom.” The research question, “How does a teacher negotiate teaching for social justice within an early childhood classroom?” guided this inquiry. Ashley’s parents sent their email in the midst of this study.

“This is What Teaching Should be”: Olivia’s Pedagogical Approach and its Connections to Critical Literacy

Literature Review

Critical literacy is not prepackaged curricular material; its implementation will look differently from classroom to classroom, as it depends upon the dispositions of the teacher, the community context, and the students in the room (Vasquez, Janks, & Comber, 2019). While a singular definition of critical literacy is elusive, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed 30 years of literature and offer the following four tenets: “1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382).

This work can take many forms. For example, in a fourth-grade classroom, students considered counter-narratives about who can be an elite athlete, thus highlighting the experiences and talents of women in the typically male-dominated arena of professional sports (Rodesiler, 2019). In a second-grade classroom, students unpacked the dimensions of oppression through children’s literature to gain an understanding of social and political power by discussing the following themes (1) conquest (2) divide and rule (3) manipulation and (4) cultural invasion (Boutte and Muller, 2018). Other studies examine how read alouds are used by critical literacy educators as spaces to engage in social justice work. For instance, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2019) describe how and when a fourth-grade teacher read aloud a book with LGBTQ characters; the ensuing class discussion focused students’ attention on power dynamics and identity-based bullying. Furthermore, Van Horn and Hawkman (2018) detail how using trade books during social studies can lead to meaningful and historically accurate lessons on marriage equality. For

example, trade books about LGBTQ families can supplement the teaching of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case that legally protects same-sex marriage (Van Horn & Hawkman, 2018). In terms of examining issues of race, McClung (2017) explored how a child problematized and recreated a character's racist name.

While it is possible for critical literacy practices to become isolated within the read aloud portion of the school day, it is important for students to hone their critical, justice-oriented lenses all day long. Vasquez (2004) details the inquiries her junior kindergartners embarked upon over the course of one school year. Using class meeting as the space for students to pose concerns, examples of their emergent critical literacy curriculum include challenging school policies, advocating for classmates, and critically analyzing McDonald's Happy Meals (Vasquez, 2004). The class documented their work throughout the year on a growing audit trail, or visual display of learning (Vasquez, 2004). By knowing the academic standards and mandated curriculum, Vasquez was able to justify the students' work as academically rigorous.

Similarly, Cowhey (2006) outlines the routines and procedures she put in place to create her Peace Class. For example, she taught history from silenced perspectives first and taught about activism in a classroom framed by the goal of trying to make the world a better place. Vasquez (2004) and Cowhey (2006) demonstrate how it is possible to have social justice as the heartbeat of your classroom; the consistent rhythm upon which the rest of the curriculum relies. This is a sophisticated and worthy goal for classroom teachers. Olivia, however, admitted she didn't know how to infuse social justice into all parts of the day yet. As a result, she made spaces where she could.

Olivia and Critical Literacy

Olivia naturally taught in a way that valued multiple perspectives, considered power dynamics, and explored relevant sociopolitical topics. For example, her quest for a social justice atmosphere was influenced by current racial tensions making national news. She explains her pedagogical influences,

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 where unarmed Black men were unjustifiably killed] 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.

Olivia saw the elementary school classroom as a place to teach students how to value, but also critique multiple perspectives, to question power dynamics, and to work for justice. Olivia designed learning engagements that brought sociopolitical topics like poverty, homelessness, and identity into the classroom. When exploring such issues, she challenged her students to interrupt the status quo asking them, "Why is it like this? Who benefits from it being like this? Whose voice is missing? Is this fair?"

In accordance with many critically-minded educators (see for example, McClung, 2017; Van Horn & Hawkman, 2018), Olivia used literature as an entry point to her social justice teaching. Like Boutte and Muller (2018), she believed young children should learn to engage with the concept of oppression. With a wide array of socially conscious picture books available (i.e., Enriquez, Cunningham, Dawes, & Cappiello, 2019; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2019), she

thoughtfully selected texts about sociopolitical topics and read them aloud to her class each Friday during what she named “social justice read aloud time.”

While Olivia envisioned “a social justice classroom” where issues of equity permeated the curriculum, she admitted she did not know how to blend those pedagogical desires with the standard curriculum and assessments she was required to implement. She expressed admiration, but also frustration after reading Cowhey’s (2006) account of her justice oriented first grade classroom. Olivia sought empirical examples of critical literacy as lived, but was content to settle for read alouds on Fridays as her reserved curricular space. Her situation highlights the practical challenges teachers face when trying to reconcile critical literacy practices with school expectations. In Olivia’s case, she was the only teacher in her building actively striving to teach for social justice. She did not have models to observe or peers with whom she could problem-solve. She did have a clear commitment to teaching her students to question power, to consider multiple perspectives, and to work for equity. She did the best she could within the walls of her classroom to make that happen.

Context

Beech Elementary first opened for the 2015-2016 school year. Official data production began in March of 2016 and I spent one morning and one afternoon in Olivia’s classroom observing each week for a total of 16 observations. I was a helpful observer (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) and offered students assistance when needed, but generally stayed quiet and off to the side. While students joined and left her classroom throughout the year, the most consistent class was comprised of 12 boys and 10 girls. Of those 22 students, 10 were White, nine were Black, two were mixed race, and one was Latinx.

Researcher Positionality

I am a middle-class White woman who was raised in the Midwest. I taught elementary school for 10 years and first learned about critical literacy in graduate school, seven years into my teaching career. Understanding the critical literacy framework transformed my approach to teaching and I shifted my focus from student proficiency through engaging lessons toward teaching about equity, oppression, power, identity, and social justice. During my time in Olivia's classroom, she independently chose to build social justice read aloud time around race and identity, which was in line with my interest in critical literacy.

Olivia and I were colleagues who became good friends before this study began. We never discussed the racial dynamics between us – a Black teacher and a White researcher. For me, the purpose of our partnership was to learn from Olivia what it takes to create a social justice classroom. As a White woman who benefits from unearned privilege, I have felt uncomfortable talking about race with students. While I can welcome and respect the experiences and perspectives of students of color, I cannot relate. I looked to Olivia as someone who could facilitate conversations with students differently than I could and I sought to learn from her.

Methodology

This was a case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I identified Olivia and her emerging social justice pedagogy as the phenomena of interest in an effort to gain more insight into the processes of teaching for social justice in early childhood spaces. Data was produced by multiple sources including (1) transcribed interviews with Olivia, (2) transcribed audio and video recordings of social justice read aloud time, (3) field notes, (4) my reflective and analytic memos.

Theoretical Framework

There are three key Foucauldian concepts about power that led to my insights 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).

Power as Flowing

Power is not possessed; it is exercised (Foucault, 1980). If power is not possessed, that means that it is not reserved solely for the 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. This conceptualization of power in motion, what I call the "swirl of power," guided my thinking about how and when Olivia struggled against forces of power, she herself became of vehicle of power (Foucault, 1980).

Power as Productive, Not Solely Repressive

Foucault (1978) questions the purpose of power. Is power used most often to repress? There is certain evidence of repressive effects of power, as demonstrated by the work of Marx and Engels (1848), Gramsci (1971), and Freire (1970/2000). 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 binary 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.

Analyzing the Effects of Power

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 was 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.

Analysis

Thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) was utilized to analyze the data. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) offer this as an alternative to coding, arguing 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.

Analytic Question

This study was framed by the question, “How does a teacher negotiate teaching for social justice within an early childhood classroom?” In learning more about Olivia’s teaching experiences, I became interested in how the actors (i.e., administrators, families) around her influenced her social justice agenda and how she moved around them. Considering Olivia as a “vehicle of power” (Foucault, 1980), I sought to understand how challenges and her subsequent responses influenced her teaching goals. Engaging Foucault’s conceptualization of power with the data, I created an analytic question that guided my tentative meaning making: *What do the exercises of power that flow through/from/within/around Olivia produce in the context of her social justice teaching?* I now return to the parent email and include data excerpts that detail Olivia’s experience. In an effort to do the work of critical literacy and value multiple perspectives, however, I also consider the swirl of power around the others involved. Insights suggest what power produced for each participant.

Insights

Olivia - Power produces validation: “They Get Happy When We Talk About Their Differences”

The email from Ashley’s parents 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 talking about race. In the email, as reported by Olivia, Ashley’s parents questioned Olivia’s decision to teach about social justice and asked, “Where are the core

values of reading, writing, and math?” They requested that Ashley be removed from the classroom indefinitely or at least during social justice-oriented activities.

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 reiterated they would like their daughter to be out of the room during social justice lessons. Mrs. Briggs, the principal, never responded directly to the family, but she made it clear to Olivia 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 administrator’s lack of support. Talking through this situation, Olivia articulated why she thought exploring differences with her students was important. She explained,

She [Ashley’s mom] mentioned [in the email] how... how she’s [Ashley] happy and 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... [Differences] are important, and if we don’t acknowledge them, they do become negative. ...what struck me the most is that she said I needed to focus on reading, writing and math...those things can’t be effective if kids are in an atmosphere where they’re not comfortable....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... 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.

Author: And you even said Diego [a Latinx student], 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 Mrs. Briggs 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.’

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 teaching, she felt abandoned by her administrators. Olivia cared deeply about her students and highly valued relationships with families.

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 questioned by a family who had previously been supportive. 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. She said,

I get so excited for...Friday [social justice read aloud time]. I get to teach. I can teach, not reading out of a [literacy curriculum] book. You get real opinions [from students] ... This is what teaching should be. That other stuff [basics of reading and writing] will come.

The read-alouds provided a space for her students to be critical thinkers and to question the status quo, whereas the mandated curriculum prioritized a narrow focus on skill mastery. Olivia's reflection reminded her of the importance of her work. As she thought through the parental concerns and weighed them against her social justice goals, she wondered if families choose not to discuss race, 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.

Her students also encouraged her to persist. They, including Ashley, were highly engaged with the stories and discussions on Friday afternoons. Olivia chose to focus on identity and introduced her students to racial segregation through the books she chose (i.e., *Freedom on the menu*, Weatherford, 2005; *Goin someplace special*, McKissack, 2001). Olivia described Sam, whose passionate participation 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!'

In other words, Olivia was not deterred by Ashley's parents' protests or by Mrs. Briggs's lack of involvement. Instead, she thought about Diego, Sam, and the rest of her students who deserved to see themselves in the curriculum, who needed the space and guidance to make sense of sociopolitical issues and to learn how to be active citizens. Power swirled from Ashley's parents and Mrs. Briggs toward Olivia and her students. Her second graders had shown, through their participation in social justice read aloud time, that the work was engaging and important;

her teaching was validated because it was meaningful to them. Instead of allowing expressions of power to repress her teaching, Olivia kept the swirl of power in motion by choosing to remain committed to her social justice goals.

Ashley - Power Produces Deviance: “I Think She [Ashley] Wanted to Feel Included.”

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. Ashley was essentially left alone to navigate her new position in (outside of) the classroom. A previously engaged and active participant during social justice read aloud time, she was now excluded from these lessons. Olivia did not want to upset her family further, so she did not talk in detail about this new arrangement with Ashley. Olivia 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 on Ashley’s situation,

I think at first she [Ashley] 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 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.

Olivia admitted that the most severe consequence of this challenge to her social justice agenda fell on Ashley. A previously eager participant was removed from her classroom for reasons she may not have fully understood.

That being said, Ashley 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, to covertly engage in the discussions taking place. Ashley's practices created pathways to participate within her newly restrictive circumstances. While her involvement in this class activity was repressed, she kept the swirl of power in motion through her deviance.

Mrs. Briggs - Power Produces Avoidance/Quiet Support: "I'm Not Touching That Beast"

Olivia was not only upset that a family challenged her credibility, she also felt abandoned by her principal. While it appeared that Mrs. Briggs trusted and valued Olivia as a teacher, when Olivia was confronted by disgruntled parents, she left her alone. There was no conversation regarding what was upsetting about the assignment or how Mrs. Briggs might provide support. If Mrs. Briggs had any opinion at all, she did not share it with Olivia. Olivia recounted,

... Mrs. Briggs said, 'That's [the situation around the parent email] a good reflection piece...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.

This lack of communication deepened the void of Olivia's understanding of Mrs. Briggs'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.

Race is a sensitive topic. Olivia didn't want to press Mrs. Briggs for support, so she chose to do as she was told, sending Ashley into the hallway with an iPad each Friday afternoon. A couple weeks after Ashley's parents sent the email, Olivia checked in with Mrs. Briggs to see if she had responded to them. Olivia explained, "I asked her [Mrs. Briggs] if she contacted her [Ashley's mom]. 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.'

While it was unclear if "the beast" was the parent complaint, the social justice work, or something else entirely, Mrs. Briggs did not want to engage. By distancing herself from "the beast," Mrs. Briggs communicated that she was unwilling to vocally support Olivia's social justice agenda. Olivia described what she wished Mrs. Briggs would have done,

I wanted her [Mrs. Briggs] 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 okay for me.

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 administrator offered no vocal support and accommodated the family. There was no discussion about what the concern actually was; rather Olivia was told to make it better and she did. Olivia made it better for Ashley's parents and for Mrs. Briggs, but not for Ashley or herself.

Mrs. Briggs could have been frustrated, as Olivia inferred, and perhaps did not want to be bothered with a parent complaint. Maybe Mrs. Briggs wanted nothing to do with Olivia's social justice teaching and simply chose to ignore it.

Alternatively, this could have been Mrs. Briggs's quiet effort to support Olivia. By leaving Olivia and I alone, by not intervening and simply forwarding the email without comment, Mrs. Briggs 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. Mrs. Briggs 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.

Discussion

The Danger of "I Don't See Color"

There are different ways to perceive, enact, and experience racism. For many Whites, racism means blatant prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). With that understanding, there is safety in claiming to be colorblind. "I don't care if they're Black, White, or green with polka dots, I treat all the children the same" (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011, p. 335) is a common sentiment of teachers in early childhood classrooms across the country. This superficial version of love (Johnson, Bryan, & Boutte, 2018) masquerades as an enlightened and inclusive social stance.

However, the colorblind ideology justifies (and thus maintains) racial inequality by explaining "contemporary racial inequity as the outcome of nonracial dynamics" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 2). For example, residential segregation is rationalized as the natural preferences of group members, as opposed to overtly prejudiced business practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). These social practices

inherited generation after generation strengthen the foundation of the institutionalized racism upon which our country was founded.

When Ashley's parents asserted that their White second grader did not see color, they projected a colorblind stance onto her. However, children as young as three years old learn racism within social settings, on television, in books, and in a myriad of other spaces (Boutte et al., 2011). Ashley did see color. She was a member of a beautifully diverse class guided by a talented Black teacher. She was an active participant in a classroom where she could develop and question her conceptualizations of race.

Ashley's parents used their power as White people to complain to the White principal in order to remove their White daughter from meaningful instruction of a Black teacher. They did not picket outside Olivia's classroom or make any publicly racist moves, but, while seemingly innocent or perhaps well-intentioned, the colorblind claim denies the existence of racial difference and continues the legacy of racial oppression.

Teachers as “Vehicles of Power”

Thinking through Olivia's experience with a Foucauldian conceptualization of power portrays teachers as “powerful.” Olivia was knocked off balance by the parent complaint, paused to recalibrate, and emerged with a solidified commitment to her social justice teaching. In doing so, she kept the swirl of power in motion. Teachers often feel powerless when bombarded with curricular mandates, standardized testing, and various administrative and family pressures. Olivia shows us that in the midst of challenging professional circumstances, we choose how we respond

How Do We Enter into Productive Conversations with Adults?

Something I think merits further exploration by both teachers and researchers is how to productively engage those who may oppose using a critical literacy framework. Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2019) discuss the importance of inviting families who resist inclusive curricula into dialogue. Understanding parental resistance as an opportunity to clarify curricular decisions enables teachers to respond, not in a defensive manner, but rather with coherent language that outlines their pedagogical perspectives (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019).

Olivia's experience missed this crucial step because Ashley's parents refused to talk with her. Imagine if Mrs. Briggs, Ashley's parents, and Olivia gathered around the same table. Who might lead the discussion? What points would be made? What questions would be asked? In what ways might Ashley be involved in the decision-making process that most drastically impacted her? How might teachers create spaces to respectfully challenge the assumptions and positions of families and administrators when they resist engaging in conversation? In a time when people barricade themselves in their own ideological corners surrounded by like-minds, it is crucial we find ways to listen to those with different perspectives.

Our Students as Our Best Hope

What, perhaps is most compelling about this challenge Olivia faced, is Ashley. Amidst the silent friction of the adults, Ashley reacted to her exclusion from social justice read aloud time in her own way, keeping power in motion. She did not sit in the hallway complacently, letting the grown-ups dictate her participation. Ashley wanted to hear the stories and discussion around the social justice story of the week, so she chose to find ways to do so. She acted in her own best interest – an admirable move for a second grade student. Ashley provides a sense of hope for all of us – hope that our students will rise above the tangled ideological webs that so easily trap adults in order to create their own paths toward justice.

I invite you to imagine a similar scenario in your setting. What might (has) happen(ed) when critical literacy practices are (were) challenged by families or colleagues? In what ways would (have) you (un)productively address(ed) them? There is a need for more stories like Olivia's to be shared so we can expand our own understandings of how to come together in order to ensure our young learners develop their critical thinking skills and become advocates for equity.

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